A Philippines Novelette by L. Clifford

Short Stories

Twice A Month

SEPTEMBER 25th

25c

W. C. TUTTLE'S

Complete Novel

ACES OF AZTEC PASS

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Garnett Radcliffe

Capt. Fred Moore

Sewell P. Wright

Leonard Gribble

A Blessing in "Hard Times"

New Soles as low as 9¢ A PAIR

FREE SAMPLE SAVASOLE

To Readers of This Magazine

See this amazing new discovery that ends shoe repair bills—makes buying new shoes unnecessary. It's called SAVASOLE—a scientific plastic material which spreads on worn soles and heels like spreading butter on bread. Hardens overnight. Makes "worn-out" shoes like new—makes them wear for months and months. Cost of half soles with Savasole as low as 9c a pair. The plastic material fills in all cuts, holes, cracks, forming a smooth, flexible, waterproof, non-skid surface. A patch for a penny, or a new half sole for a few cents. Agents and distributors CLEANING UP with this sensational "hard times" specialty. New low price means EVERYBODY buys. Mail coupon NOW for Free Sample on leather and big money-making agents' offer. Learn how YOU can earn up to $42 A DAY with Savasole.

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No more taking shoes to the cobbler. No paying from $1.00 to $1.75 for leather or rubber soles and heels. No more pegs, nails, or stitches to hurt the feet. No more shoes pulled out of shape by stiff leather half soles. No more buying new shoes. Just spread SAVASOLE on the worn-out soles and heels or merely patch the worn spots. Let it dry overnight. In the morning you have a new wearing surface that is hard, smooth and durable. Flexible—comfortable—will not "draw" the feet. Wears like leather and is absolutely waterproof. CANNOT COME OFF. Your satisfaction is GUARANTEED.

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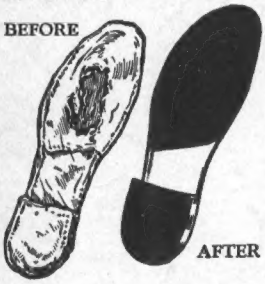
BEFORE



AFTER

Here is the same shoe repaired with SAVASOLE. No hammer, nails or pegs. Just use an old knife. All cracks and breaks filled in and covered up with long-wearing, smooth, flexible, water-proof, non-skid surface. SAVASOLE repairs shoes for one-tenth the cost of ordinary heels and soles.

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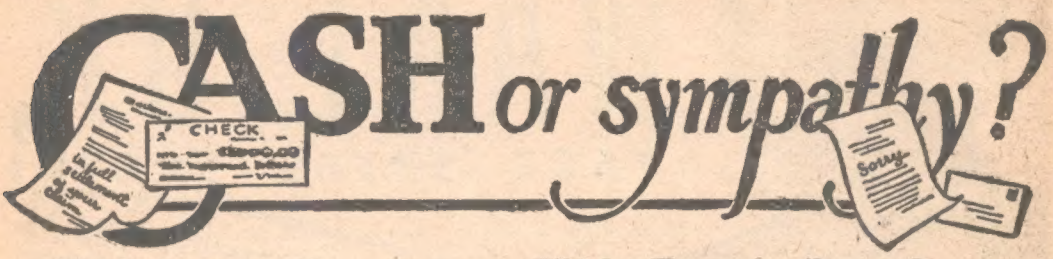

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Mail the Coupon today!

Mail the Coupon before it's too late to protect yourself against the chances of fate picking you out as its next victim.

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Gentlemen: At no cost to me send copy of your booklet "Cash or Sympathy."

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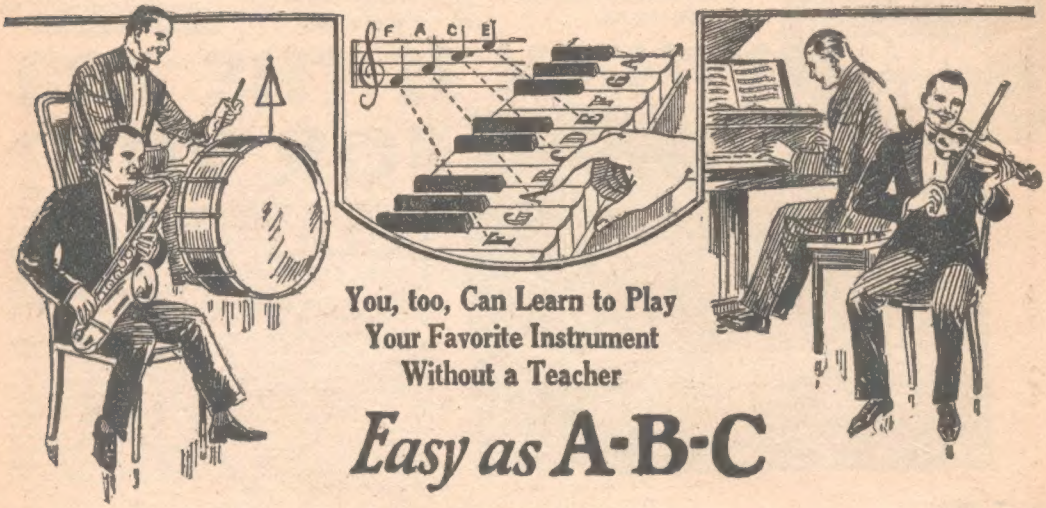

You, too, Can Learn to Play Your Favorite Instrument Without a Teacher

Easy as A-B-C

YES, over half a million delighted men and women all over the world have learned music this quick, easy way.

Half a million—what a gigantic orchestra they would make! Some are playing on the stage, others in orchestras, and many thousands are daily enjoying the pleasure and popularity of being able to play some instrument.

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It is like a fascinating game. From the very start you are playing real tunes, perfectly, by note. You simply can't go wrong, for every step, from beginning to end, is right before your eyes in print and picture. First you are told how to do a thing, then a picture shows you how, then you do it yourself and hear it. And almost before you know it, you are playing your favorite pieces—jazz, ballads, classics. No private teacher could make it clearer. Little theory—plenty of accomplishment. That's why students of the U. S. School of Music get ahead twice as fast—three times as fast as those who study old-fashioned, plodding methods.

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Please send me your free book, "Music Lessons in Your Own Home," with introduction by Dr. Frank Crane, Free Demonstration Lesson, and particulars of your easy payment plan. I am interested in the following course:

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etc.

All in our next issue

SHORT STORIES for Oct. 10th

THE GREATEST AND BEST

Short

TWICE A MONTH

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ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

Stories

R. DE S. HORN, *EDITOR*

Title Registered in U. S. Patent Office

Sept. 25th, 1932

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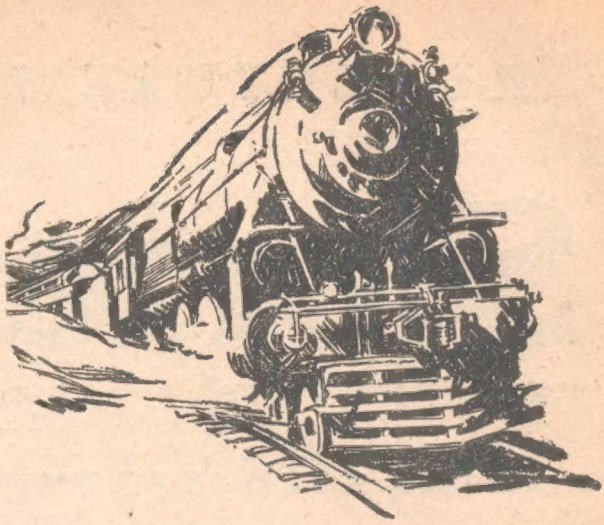
OLD HOG HEAD

By Edgar Daniel Kramer



Pensioned an' takin' things easy!
Ain't that one heluva joke?
I want my cap to be greasy!
I want to taste th' black smoke
An' hear th' steam fiercely hissin',
But it's no more on th' cards
For me to be shootin'
Old Seventeen tootin'
On th' main line from th' yards!

With th' switch frogs sharply clickin',
Limited draggin' behind,
I'd have my Seventeen kickin'
Joyously out on her grind!
Thunderin' over th' crossin's!
Smoke belchin' out of her stack!
Her big drivers poundin'!
Her shrill whistle soundin'!
Green! An' we'd get a clear track!

Pensioned an' dumped on a sidin'!
Huh! I'd be callin' their bluff!
In my old cab I'd be ridin',
Seventeen doin' her stuff
With my fist holdin' her throttle,
While I hang over her sill!
"Red" Clancy's scoop clangin'!
Th' fire-door bangin'!
Sixty? Ten better! Some thrill!

Soft? Holy hell! I ain't lazy!
Feel of that arm! Ain't I fit?
Orders is orders, though crazy!
Twiddlin' my thumbs, here I sit,
While some young squirt gets my signal,
An', with a rush an' a roar,
In spite of my cussin'
An' fumin' an' fussin',
Seventeen pounds out once more!

TWICE A MONTH **Short Stories** September 25th 1932

TIN CANS

SOME wise fellow once observed that the whole history of modern civilization was written in tin cans. And there's more truth than poetry in that remark.

Most of us have become so used to eating canned meats, canned fruits, canned preserves, canned milk, and every other sort of canned foods, that we forget there was a day when there wasn't any such thing as an airtight can. You ate fresh meat those days, in the winter time, when it would keep, or else you ate dried meat. Dried meat, or "jerky," was the staple food carried by every trapper and pioneer in the early days when fresh food could not be had. And in foreign countries it was the same way. You'll find every race of people, right back to the ancient Egyptians and Babylonians, used dried meat as a big part of their staple food supply. Dried fruits made up another big item in the bill of fare. That was why the date palm was such an important thing in the desert countries of the East; dates dried well and were very nutritious.

You'll find that, in the hot countries like India and Africa, pepper and other spices and condiments came into use for the same reason. Food couldn't be kept any too well, but by seasoning the dish highly with spices you couldn't tell if the meats or other ingredients maybe had become a little too high.

Ice, of course, was a very good preservative in countries where there was plenty of cold weather in the winter time. The early colonists quickly learned to cut ice in the winter and put it away for the summer so they could preserve their meats longer during the hot weather.

But when that Great Man who invented the tin can came along, he moved civilization forward hundreds of years. Even the cowboys and trappers, who were as hardy a lot as ever lived, discovered the advantages of the tin can. A cowboy who had to cross a long waterless stretch knew that he could make it in comfort on a can or two of tomatoes, the juice of which satisfied his thirst at the same time that the pulp gave him nourishment. And any storekeeper in a mining district or cowtown who didn't lay in a good supply of canned peaches and plums and such was likely to find himself riding on a rail the first Saturday a lot of hungry riders got to town. The cowboy, like all outdoor workers, has a great appetite for sweets, and the canned fruits suited him right down to his bootheels.

Sailors, explorers, travelers, and the millions who fought in the World War, know what cans meant in the way of food and comfort. And to the everyday citizen, cans mean just that and more; it means meat and fish at all seasons, as well as fruits throughout the year instead of just during the hot summer months.

Yessir; the man who invented the tin can is deserving of a monument. And if all the empty tin cans left by careless, shiftless campers were piled into one heap, it sure would make a monument, wouldn't it?

—The Editor

Aces of Aztec Pass

By W. C. Tuttle

Author of "Shacktown Jones—Liar," "Hank Potts—Historian," etc.

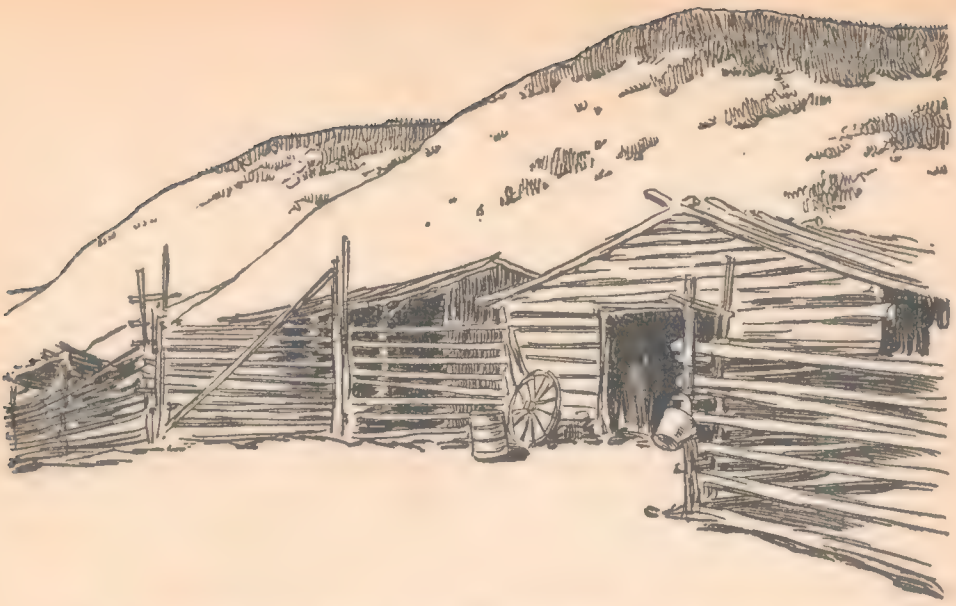
Chapter I

A COWBOY AT LARGE

THE fog that night was of the pea-soup variety, and with it came gusts of rain off the Pacific, as though some giant of the seas was out there wielding a gigantic broom. Everything was adrip, and the soggy air stank of seaweed, tules and other smells which drift in with the fogs and rain.

Down in the harbor the fog horns wailed dismally, but out here along the beach the sounds did not reach. The spluttering arc lights did not penetrate the fog, being in themselves mere globs of white, a sort of halo, failing to even illuminate the highway below them.

Sundown West's reasons for being in a roadhouse gambling joint on this highway are of no consequence. He went there with a man who thought West had money. As a matter of fact, Sundown West was only three weeks removed from the Arizona State Penitentiary, where he had spent nearly two years of his young life. Sundown was now just turned twenty-five, and the gods of luck had smiled upon him until he sat there in that smoke-filled



The creator of Cultus Collins, Sad and Swede, and many other popular Western characters, introduces another. Meet Sundown West.

room, a hundred and fifty dollars to the good.

Sundown West had red hair, turquoise blue eyes and freckles. His mouth was wide, his nose of the stub variety, and his chin jutted belligerently. He was five feet, eleven inches in height and had the physique of a middleweight. Prison had not even scratched him, except to possibly make him a bit cynical of people and things.

In an inside pocket of his coat were his parole papers, and in coming to San Francisco he had already broken that parole. In very plain words they stated that for five years Charles K. West must not leave the State of Arizona, and that at regular intervals he must report to a peace officer.

Sundown West thought he was through with Arizona; through with the rangelands for good. He intended shipping to the Orient. Further than that, he had no plans. With the five dollars the warden gave him he bought five dollars worth of poker chips in a game of draw, and quit with the price of new clothes and two hundred dollars in cash. And among the new clothes were a pair of fancy-stitched cowboy boots and a forty-dollar Stetson hat. The call of the old life was strong, even if he was going to the Orient, and with forty dollars more he purchased a Colt forty-five revolver.

SUNDOWN shoved back from the table and watched the dealer cash in his chips. He was wise enough to know that even the gods of luck fly away when a new dealer sits into a game. Sundown pocketed his winnings and strolled over to the bar. The room was crowded with both sexes. A girl snuggled up to him, trying to talk baby-patter to him, but Sundown shook his head, touched his ears to indicate that he was deaf, and she let him alone.

He was leaning on the bar, hat on the back of his head, watching the harassed bartender trying to mix several kinds of drinks at the same time, when from outside came the wailing moan of a police siren. It was close, that siren; so close that it

caused a panic in the roadhouse. They all knew what it meant—a raid.

Sundown shoved back from the bar. He couldn't afford to be arrested; not with an Arizona parole in his pocket—and a six-shooter. But before he could figure out just what to do, the front door was flung open and a sergeant of police, followed by a half-dozen uniformed officers poured into the place.

"Hold still, everybody," ordered the sergeant. "Don't go for the windows nor the doors; the place is surrounded."

The sergeant walked the length of the room, looking at the gambling layouts. He came back and faced the crowd.

"We'll need more than one wagon for this gang," he said. "Casey!"

"Yes, sor," responded an officer.

"Line up twenty and parade 'em to the wagon. We'll hold the rest for another load."

CASEY selected his twenty, and among them was Sundown West. They were lined up parallel to the bar and headed for the main doorway. None of them were searched. Sundown was fourth from the front, and as an officer grasped his left elbow to help him into the patrol wagon, Sundown twisted on his heel and drove his right fist straight into the jaw of the assisting officer. The officer was falling, when Sundown sprang over him.

A night-stick whizzed from the doorway, struck Sundown a glancing blow on the right cheek, as he staggered from landing in the slippery mud, but did not stop him. A few running steps, and he was swallowed up in the fog. From behind him came the angry yells of the police, the stentorian voice of the sergeant, telling them to let him go, and take care of the rest of the people.

Sundown stumbled along in the fog, following the highway for a short distance, thankful to be out of the clutches of the police. He had been a fool not to have destroyed that parole paper. Had he been taken to police headquarters, and searched, he would have spent his next five years in that same prison, with scant hope of a later parole. Still he didn't tear up that paper.

Somewhere off to his right was Golden Gate Park, and he thought of reaching there, finding a street car line and getting back to his hotel. He was already soaked with rain, and after he got off the highway he stumbled aimlessly around in sand dunes. There were no lights, no sky, and as far as he was concerned the earth only existed immediately under his feet.

But Sundown kept going, not knowing just what direction he was taking; trusting to luck to keep out of holes. Up and down, up and down, ankle deep in wet sand. And then he crashed into something that drove him back several steps. It was a solid wall, it seemed. Cautiously he felt ahead, until his hands came in contact with wet boards. It was the side of a house. There was a wide overhang to the roof, and for the first time since he had knocked down the policeman he was out of the rain.

But the house was not habitable, not with half-inch cracks between the twelve-inch boards. Sundown wondered if his tobacco and matches were all wet. He wiped his wet hands on a handkerchief, and began digging in his pockets. It was then that he heard voices. They were beyond that wall, apparently coming toward him.

Then they opened a creaking door, one of the men using a tiny spotlight, which he quickly switched off, when they were inside. Sundown stood perfectly still, as they seemed to be searching for something. One of the men cursed the weather, and the other laughed.

"This weather is made to order for us," he said.

"I suppose it is, but I'll be damn glad to get out of it. Do you think it's safe to leave her there with Bugs?"

"Safe as a church. Don't be gettin' jumpy; you make me tired. We'll slip downtown, get all the dope from the papers, and come back. We've got to have more stuff."

"Then you don't think the police will come out here?"

"Not in this kinda weather, they won't. Not in any kind, as far as that goes. They'll search all the downtown dumps, Chinatown—aw, hell, I've explained all that before. This man has got plenty money, and this girl means more to him than anything on earth. He'll cough up a hundred thousand in a minute. Now, cut that worryin' and let's git goin'."

"All right. But this is my first job of this kind, Shorty; and it means the rope, if they catch us."

They closed the door, and went sloshing away. Sundown put the tobacco and papers back in his pocket and leaned against the wall.

"It looks to me as though these two jiggers have kidnapped some girl," he told himself. "A hundred thousand dollars ransom! And the two men, leaving one man as a guard, have gone downtown to see what the papers had to say about it."

Sundown felt his way to the corner, but could see nothing. He found the lock on the door, but the building was only an old shed. The girl was evidently held elsewhere—but where? There were some old planks on the ground, possibly used as a walk. They might lead somewhere, decided Sundown.

Feeling carefully with his soggy boots, he followed the planks in the darkness, one hand shoved forward to prevent him from crashing into any object. It was well that he did this, because his hand came in contact with a porch post in time to save him from a fall.

AS HE stood there, undecided what to do next, he saw a light. It was more of a glow than a light, and it was several moments before Sundown convinced himself that it was from a window, which was not more than three feet from his eyes. The wind was coming in violent gusts, and Sundown crouched low to escape some of it.

He slid cautiously across the wet porch and peered through the window. An old curtain sagged enough to let Sundown get a fair view of the poorly furnished living room of this shack in the dunes. Near the center was a small table, on which was an oil lamp, and beside this table, sagged back in a dilapidated rocker, was a big man, reading a newspaper and smoking a pipe.

Near him was a heating stove, one side glowing hot, and on top of it was a teakettle, steaming merrily. The man was roughly dressed and very intent on his reading. There was no question in Sundown's mind that the house was locked. The wind hurled rain against the window, and Sundown's sombrero leaked streams down the back of his neck.

The old window had wooden shutters, which had been fastened back against the wall with wires, at which the force of the wind made the shutters tug. This gave Sundown a sudden idea. He unhooked a wire and let the shutter bang against the frame. At the first bang of the shutter the man jerked to his feet, a gun in his hand.

He started for the door, stopped and looked all around. Sundown drew the shutter back and let it bang again. When the man started for the window, Sundown crouched aside, jerked back the shutter and swung it hard against the frame.

The figure of the man blotted out the light, as he came in close. Apparently he saw the swinging shutter and walked away. Sundown watched him go back to the table, pick up the paper and start to sit down again, but the shutter banged again, and the man threw his paper aside. He picked up a black slicker and a hat, indicating that he was coming out to tie back that shutter, and Sundown slid off the porch between the window and the door.

The man did not carry any light. He jerked the door shut behind him, and came over to the window. The storm made so much noise that he did not hear Sundown, and as he stooped over to fasten the wire, Sundown's six-shooter barrel thudded soggily against his head.

"Yo're worth a hundred dollars on the

hoof, even at the cheap price of beef," panted Sundown, as he dragged the man into the house. He dragged him over near the table and looked at him in the lamplight.

"Socked yuh pretty hard, pardner; but you had to be cold."

He took the man's gun from his slicker pocket. On the table was a padlock key, and across the room was a padlocked door.

"I'd tie yuh up, if I had some rope," said Sundown, "but I ain't got no rope. Anyway, I don't reckon you'll be active for a while. Now, I'll see what you've got locked in that room."

Sundown took the lamp with him, unlocked the door and flung it open. In the center of the little room was a girl, roped to a chair, staring wide eyed at Sundown and his lamp. Sundown knew little about feminine styles, but he knew instinctively that this girl was wearing an evening dress. It had been torn in several places. On the floor was a pair of soiled pumps, along with a small, lace hat, which had been flattened by a heavy, muddy boot.

The girl was pretty, and in spite of her distress she looked defiantly at Sundown. It was cold in there, and the roof leaked. Sundown placed the lamp on the floor, drew out his knife and proceeded to cut the ropes loose. Neither of them spoke, until she was free.

"We better put on yore shoes, ma'am," said Sundown. "It's shore wet and muddy out. I'd say yuh better warm up by that stove, but yuh never know when them two fellers will be back, and we don't want to both be tied up."

"Who are you?" she asked hoarsely.

"Names don't mean a thing, ma'am. I don't even know you, but I've got a hunch that you've been kidnapped."

THE girl cried out from the pain of returning circulation, and Sundown carried her out to the rocker, where she looked fearfully at the man on the floor.

"He won't hurt yuh," grinned Sundown. "But that gives me a idea; you'll wear that slicker. Now, I'll git yore shoes."

The girl's teeth were chattering from the cold and the reaction, but she still had nerve. Sundown wrapped the slicker around her.

"Got any idea where we are?" he asked. The girl shook her head.

"Well, anyway, we've got to get out of this place. It's a cinch you can't walk far in them shoes. But we'll get there, if I have to carry yuh."

"You are very kind," she said wearily. "You've been hurt, too."

Sundown felt of his swollen cheek, where the policeman's nightstick had hit him.

"Is my eye black?" he asked.

"Your eye isn't so black, but your cheek is swollen."

"I reckon I'll live it down," he laughed. "C'mon."

Neither of them knew which way to go, but luckily they struck some sort of a road, and in about fifteen minues they saw a string of ghostly street lights, which proved to be along a street car track. It seemed hours before the car came. The conductor glanced curiously at them, as Sundown paid the fare.

"Looks like rain," said Sundown.

"Clouding up a little," smiled the conductor.

Sundown did not ask the girl where she lived. They came down to Market Street, and she led the way to the Palace Hotel.

"I'm not goin' in," he told her. "Good night."

"But you must go in," she said. "You simply must. Don't you understand that you——"

"Tomorrow—mebbe," said Sundown. "Get out of this rain."

"Will you come tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow at ten o'clock."

He shoved her toward the entrance, where a boy was coming out with a lot of baggage, stepped aside and hurried down the street. He caught a street car and rode down near the Ferry Building, where he had a room in a cheap hotel. All the clothes he had in the world were on his back, and he was wet to the skin.

"I'm shore dumb," he told himself. "I never even asked that girl what her name was—and I said I'd meet her at ten o'clock. I'll betcha these clothes won't be dry for a week—and I don't remember what color her eyes were, nor the color of her hair. Well, mebbe she'll recognize me by my swelled cheek—but it'll be just as well if she don't."

HAD Sundown West read the evening papers he would have realized what the return of this girl meant to the police and detective force of San Francisco. The headlines had shrieked a kidnapping of a girl and her fiancé, while every officer in the bay region had gone on an intensive search. Rita Priest, daughter of a wealthy Arizona cattleman, and Jack Lance, her father's foreman, soon to be married, had been missing for twelve hours, when her father, J. H. Priest, known as "Judas" Priest, had received a crude scrawl telling him of what had happened.

The note had been found that morning among Priest's mail at the Palace. It merely informed him that his daughter and Lance had been kidnapped by desperate men. Nothing was to be done, until he heard further and received instructions.

Late that afternoon Jack Lance staggered into the Palace, dirty, disheveled, hungry. He said he had been held captive all night and part of the day, after which he had been dumped out of a machine on a highway, which had proved to be out near Half-Moon Bay. Lance managed to get a ride back to the city. He said that he and Rita had been separated shortly after the three masked men had stopped their taxicab, captured them, forced the driver out of the machine, and taken them away.

Lance had no idea where Rita had been taken. Strangely enough it had happened near the same roadhouse where Sundown West had escaped the police dragnet, but on the night before. Lance said they had taken him for at least an hour's ride after Rita had been removed from the cab. They had been leaving the roadhouse, when the holdup had occurred.

The return of Rita Priest created a furore in the hotel. Detectives tried in vain to trace Sundown West after Rita had told her story. She did not know his name, and her description was rather vague.

"He has red hair and blue eyes," she said to the officers and reporters, "and he wears cowboy boots and sombrero."

Judas Priest, a huge figure of a man, with a thundering voice, swore that he would search the world to reward the man who had brought back his daughter. Jack Lance, darkly handsome, said little. But the reporters were not interested in him; this beautiful Arizona miss was much better copy. Rita had been thoughtful in not telling anybody that Sundown West was to be at the hotel at ten o'clock the next morning, but before retiring that night she told her father and Jack Lance.

Sundown was none the worse for his severe wetting. His suit was dry, but wrinkled, and the swelling on his cheek had gone down quite a little. He ate breakfast in a cheap restaurant, bought a new shirt and tie, and had a shave.

Then he made up his mind not to meet the girl. What good could come of it, he asked himself? He didn't want thanks, and he did not want any reward for what he had done.

But as the hour of ten grew near he sauntered up toward the Palace Hotel, irresistibly drawn by a pair of gray eyes.

"I'll just say howdy and pull out," he decided. "I promised her, like a blamed fool, and I hate to break a promise. I'll tell her I'm in an awful hurry."

AND at the stroke of ten, he strolled into the hotel. There were many people in the lobby, and he did not see her, until an exclamation behind him caused him to turn quickly. It was Rita Priest, laughing and holding out her hands.

"Oh, I was afraid you might not come!" she said excitedly.

"Well, I told yuh I would," he laughed. "Yuh see——"

"This is my father, Mr.——"

Sundown turned quickly, facing the huge figure of Judas Priest, with Jack Lance beside him. For several moments they stared at each other. The smile was gone from Sundown's face, his lips drew back in a half-snarl, his blue eyes clouded with bitter hate.

"Your father," he said flatly. "This man your father?"

"Why, what on earth is the matter?" asked Rita anxiously. "Daddy, what is it? For goodness sake——"

"What are you doin' here, Sundown?" asked Priest harshly. "When did you get out of the penitentiary?"

"That is none of yore business," replied Sundown flatly.

"Please tell me what is wrong," begged Rita. Several people had stopped near them. Judas Priest's voice had carrying power.

"Go back to yore room, Rita," ordered her father.

"I'll not go back to any room," she said quickly. "This is the man who brought me back here last night, and I demand to know——"

"All right, if yuh must know—this man is Sundown West, a rustler we sent to the penitentiary—and I want to know what he's doin' here."

Sundown turned to Rita. "He's tellin' yuh the truth," said Sundown bitterly. "You take his advice and go to yore room."

"I don't care how many cows you stole," declared Rita. "You are the man who saved me from those kidnappers and——"

"Maybe," interrupted Priest, "it would be easier to collect a reward than a ransom."

Lance laughed harshly. "Not a bad idea at that."

Priest drew out a well filled bill-fold, took out all the contents and held it out to Sundown.

"There's twenty-five hundred dollars, West," he said. "It likely isn't as much as you expected, but it's all I'm payin' *you.*"

With a slashing movement of his left hand, Sundown West struck the bundle of bills from Priest's hand. The big man stepped back quickly. Sundown was leaning forward, his right hand hidden inside his coat at his waist line.

"Yo're a coward, Priest," he said softly. "You accuse me of wantin' yore money, accuse me of bein' a kidnapper. Yo're dirty—both of yuh—you and Jack Lance. I didn't know she was yore daughter. But that wouldn't have made me act any different toward her. She can't help it. But I wouldn't have come here."

Sundown turned to Rita. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm glad I had the chance to help yuh, and I think yo're a mighty brave girl. Good-by."

"So you don't want any money, eh?" growled Priest. "Maybe it wasn't big enough, eh? But what are you doin' here in Frisco?"

"Listenin' to the barkin' of the mangiest coyote that ever came out of Arizona," replied Sundown. He looked through slitted eyes at Priest and Lance for several moments, turned and walked out.

Unnoticed by the actors in this little drama, quite a crowd of curious people had been drawn by the argument. Judas Priest scowled at them, as he turned to escort Rita toward the elevators. The house detective approached him quickly.

"I beg your pardon," he said softly. "This young man—you spoke of him in connection with the penitentiary, and——"

Before her father could reply, Rita spoke.

"You are mistaken," she said calmly.

Her father looked at her sharply, lifted his shaggy eyebrows a trifle, and dismissed the detective with, "I guess you're mistaken, my friend."

JACK LANCE started to follow them, changed his mind and waited for the elevator to take them up, before he joined the officer. In the living room of their suite Rita demanded an explanation of her father.

"But before you tell me anything," she said, "I want you to know that I think you treated him unjustly. No matter what he has done he was the man who brought me back safely."

Judas Priest sat down, scowling at the wall.

"It's all bosh about him not knowing who you were," he said. "Why, every paper was full of it. He ain't ignorant; he can read. I can see his game. Stole you, lost his nerve, knocked out his pardner and tried to make a hero out of himself. Lost his nerve and would be willing to save his skin for a reward."

"There were three of them, Daddy."

"Probably killed the other one. Sundown West is a bad boy, Rita."

"He refused the money."

The big man laughed harshly. "All bluff. I tell you, he lost his nerve. Afraid of the publicity. Too many detectives. Why, I'll bet he escaped from the pentitentiary."

"Daddy, be reasonable. Would he be fool enough to face you, if he was a fugitive from justice?"

"Well, if he ain't, what is he doin' here? He was sent up for five years for stealin' my cattle. He shot one of my cowboys. Didn't kill him, but that wasn't his fault. That was less than two years ago."

"I heard about it," nodded Rita. "That old Dillman place belonged to him."

"He nested in there," corrected Priest. "I ought to send a telegram to the penitentiary and find out why he's out."

"You will do no such a thing, Daddy. Have you no gratitude?"

"Not much, when it comes to men like Sundown West. He's a killer. If it hadn't been in a crowded hotel, he'd probably have shot me and Jack. He had a gun handle in his hand; I saw it. Jack was the boy who got the goods on him, and I sent him over the road. Jack's smart."

"Too smart—at times," said Rita meaningly. Her father lifted his head and looked at her.

"What's wrong between you and Jack lately?"

"Hasn't he told you?"

"Told me? What was there to tell?"

"That I broke off our engagement three days ago."

"No!"

"Yes."

Judas Priest got to his feet and put his hands on her shoulder.

"Do you mean to say that you are not goin' to marry Jack Lance?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"Well, for Heaven's sake, what went wrong?"

"I just decided that three hundred and sixty-five days a year of Jack Lance would be more than I could stand."

"There ain't a finer boy in——"

"We won't discuss his points, Daddy. Our opinions differ; and you must remember that I am the one to decide the issue."

JUDAS PRIEST took a turn of the room, hands shoved deeply in his pockets. Rita watched him, a hint of amusement in her eyes.

"I believe you are taking it harder than Jack Lance did," she said.

"I wanted to see you happily married," he said.

"Then what are you worrying about? I'd never be happy with Jack."

He shook his head wearily. "Women are funny," he said.

"Not all of them, Daddy; some have brains enough to select their own husbands."

Someone was knocking at the door, and—

Priest went over, opening the door a few inches. It was a young man, well dressed, smiling pleasantly.

"Mr. Priest?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'm from the *Call*. We have rather a garbled account of what happened down in the lobby a few minutes ago, but we want to get it all straight. Can I get you to make a statement, Mr. Priest?"

"Yes," said Judas Priest, "Go to hell!"

And he slammed the door tightly. As he walked back through the room the telephone rang sharply. It was Jack Lance, speaking from the lobby.

"How about sendin' a wire to the penitentiary?" he asked. "I just had a talk with a detective, but they don't want to arrest West, until they have authority."

"It's none of their damn business," roared Priest. "Let the State of Arizona run their own business. Me and Rita are packin' up, and you better do the same, 'cause we're leavin' here tonight."

"Leavin' tonight? Why, I thought——"

"Tonight!" snapped Priest. "If you want to stay a couple days longer, it's all right, Jack."

"Well, I might do that; I'll think it over."

Lance turned from the phone and spoke to the detective.

"Use your own judgment about that

wire," he said. "My opinion is that West is a fugitive. But Priest is naturally grateful to West, and refuses to do a thing."

"I'll risk a wire and see if there's any reward," said the detective. "I don't suppose we'll have any trouble in locating West."

"You may have trouble takin' him," smiled Lance.

Chapter II

SO MUCH FOR JUDAS PRIEST

SUNDOWN WEST muttered bitterly to himself as he walked aimlessly down Market Street. What a fool he had been for going there to see that girl! The daughter of Judas Priest! Sundown's hand was still cramped from gripping the butt of that revolver. He had wanted to shoot the sarcastic smile off Jack Lance's lips. If it had been in an Arizona barroom, someone would have been hurt.

Priest's rumbling words were still in his ears, accusing him of being the kidnapper —losing his nerve—safer to take a reward than take a chance on a ransom. And all those strange, staring faces, listening to these terrible accusations.

"I'm not goin' to leave Arizona," declared Sundown, half-aloud. "I'm goin' back there and make Judas Priest eat his words."

He suddenly discovered that a man was walking close beside him. It was a tall, slender man, bronzed from the sun. He seemed to have a friendly smile, and Sundown looked at him curiously.

"I was there in the hotel," said the man. "It was kinda rotten, if anybody asked me."

"Yea-a-a?" queried Sundown. He didn't quite understand why a stranger should be interested.

"I'm not hornin' in on yore affairs," said the man. "But if you happened to be in need of a job, I might be able to fix yuh up. Yuh see, I'm from Arizona myself."

"Job? I dunno," said Sundown. "What kind of a job?"

"I'll tell yuh somethin'," said the man confidentially, "The big man talked pretty loud, and the police are interested in this kidnappin' case, even if the girl is safe. You know what I mean. If you've got

a room, where we can talk, I'll tell yuh what I mean."

"Meanin'," said Sundown, "that they might be after me?"

"They might demand an explanation. Of course, if you've got a good alibi——"

"I've got a room down here a few blocks," said Sundown. "I've got an alibi for bein' where I was last night, but that same alibi might put me in bad with the police. Yuh see, I had to poke a policeman in the jaw to get started on that jaunt, and they might like to make me talk about it."

"I guess we better get under cover," smiled the man.

"They ain't after you, too, are they?" asked Sundown.

"They shore ain't, pardner. Let's mosey along."

Sundown led the way to his room, and they sat down.

"West," said the stranger, "my name is Pelliser—Nick Pelliser, of Moon City."

"Yeah?" replied Sundown curiously. "You knew my name?"

"We heard about yore case in Moon City, yuh know."

"Yore name isn't familiar, Pelliser."

"I suppose not. Didja ever hear of Bull Hagar?"

"The big sheepman?"

"That's Bull. More sheep than there is nuts in Brazil. Great feller, Bull is. You know Yucca Valley pretty well, I reckon."

"I ought to know it well," said Sundown slowly. "That is, I knew it two years ago."

"Place like Yucca Valley don't change much—not with Judas Priest runnin' the place."

"You ain't tryin' to tell me anythin' about Priest, are yuh?"

"I couldn't hardly do that. You knew Steve Treadway, didn't yuh?"

Sundown nodded slowly. Steve Treadway, the only man in Yucca Valley he could call friend. Good old Steve, every inch a fighter."

"And you know the Aztec Pass," said Pelliser.

"Aztec Pass? Why, yeah, I know that pass. But why——"

"Do you know that Priest hates Steve Treadway?"

"I suppose he does. If he had Steve out of the valley, he'd own it all."

"He would—and if crooked work can ever get Steve out—well, that's the situation. West, I'm layin' our cards on the table."

"Our cards?"

"Bull Hagar's cards, if yuh like that better. As a matter of fact, Priest don't own over two thousand acres of that valley. Steve Treadway owns less than a thousand."

"I thought Priest owned a hundred thousand, at least."

"A lot of people think the same thing. That's how he holds it. It's considered his land, because he claims it. Possession is nine points in the law, yuh know."

"What's all this talk leadin' to, Pelliser?"

Sheep.

SUNDOWN wrinkled his nose at the thought. He had the cowboy's natural aversion to anything pertaining to sheep. Pelliser read Sundown's thoughts exactly.

"I'm no sheep lover," he hastened to assure Sundown. "But I'm after the money—and a sheepman pays me. Steve Treadway holds the key to Yucca Valley, and the key is Aztec Pass. If we tried to enter the valley from the south, Priest could meet us in force. His men ride the north rims all the time. Priest knows that Hagar wants to come in, but he is so sure of Steve Treadway that he pays no attention to Aztec Pass. If we forced our way through Aztec Pass, we'd have to cross over Treadway's land. Arizona laws treat sheepmen fairly, but they don't give him any edge over the cowman. We know damn well what the law could an' would do to us for tresspass."

Sundown laughed shortly. "I know all

that, Pelliser; come down to cases on my end of the deal."

"I'm comin' to that right now. You leave with me tonight for Moon City. You and Steve Treadway are friends. Yore job will be to ride over to Yucca Valley and make a deal with Steve Treadway."

"To let yuh use Aztec Pass, eh?"

"That's the idea."

"To buy Steve out?"

"Hagar will outline the deal when we get to Moon City."

Sundown laughed shortly and began rolling a cigarette.

"No sense to this," he said. "Why don't Bull Hagar send one of his own men over there to make a deal with Steve?"

"Because Priest expects Bull to do that very thing. A stranger is under suspicion the minute he gets in there. Steve is watched. Priest wouldn't hesitate to kill a man. No one would suspect you, West. You, being a friend of Steve, would naturally go to see him."

Sundown scowled thoughtfully, as he lighted his cigarette.

"It's as bad as that, eh?" he mused.

"Yes, it is, West. But if we can throw a bunch of sheep through that pass, it will be the finish of Judas Priest. That won't make you cry."

"Well, I'll tell yuh, Pelliser, I wasn't goin' back to Arizona."

"You wasn't?"

"No, I wasn't. I got a bad deal over there. I had a good start, and everythin' was dandy. But I've lost it all, and I ain't got the heart to try it again. No, I was aimin' to work my way over to the Orient."

"What about yore parole?"

Sundown looked at him sharply. "You knew about that, eh?"

"Why not? It was published in a Tombstone paper."

"Yea-a-ah?"

"Sure was. How about me and you headin' for Arizona tonight? You've got to get out of Frisco. Anyway, I'd get out if I was in yore place."

Sundown wrinkled his nose thoughtfully. "I reckon I better, at that. I'll tell yuh, Pelliser, I'll go with yuh. I'll talk to Hagar, but right now I won't promise anythin'."

"I don't ask yuh to promise anythin'. You stick around here until dark and meet me at the Third and Townsend depot at eight o'clock. I'll have the tickets. Mebbe you better—no, I'll be there at the gate; so yuh won't have to waste any time in the depot. They might have detectives spotted around there, yuh see."

"All right," nodded Sundown, "I'll be there on the dot, Pelliser."

SUNDOWN had no baggage; so when the time came he walked to the depot. The waiting room was crowded, but he found Pelliser at the gate, and they went out on the platform.

"We're back in car seventy-two," said Pelliser, as they hurried down the platform.

Two men came toward them, running swiftly, going toward the gates. A crowd of people was milling around farther up the platform, and a red-cap porter, bow-legged and flat footed, came running, wide-eyed in the lights.

"Somethin' gone wrong up here," said Pelliser. "Let's get a look."

He shoved into the excited crowd, but Sundown was not so curious. In a few minutes Pelliser backed out, circled the crowd and grasped Sundown by the arm.

"C'mon!" he said sharply, fairly propelling Sundown along.

"What the devil is the matter with you?" asked Sundown.

"Don't stop to listen," warned Pelliser. "Let's get on our car as quick as we can."

Sundown was mystified, but obeyed Pelliser. Their porter glanced at the tickets, took Pelliser's bag and showed them to their stateroom. Pelliser quickly locked the door and sat down beside Sundown.

"Got a gun on yuh, West?" he asked.

"What's the idea?" asked Sundown.

Pelliser drew a deep breath.

"Never mind it," he said. "No place to ditch it, anyway. We'll have to take a chance that they don't search the train."

"Will you tell me what the hell this is all about?" asked Sundown.

"Somebody shot Judas Priest!"

"Shot him?"

"Shot or stabbed him. His shirt was bloody."

"Dead?" asked Sundown anxiously.

"I don't know; but I'm bettin' he is."

"But you know I didn't do it, Pelliser."

"Certainly yuh didn't. But that incident in the hotel today would work against yuh mighty strong. I wouldn't be worth a thin dime as an alibi for you, because it could easily be proved that I'm an enemy of Priest. There could be plenty of witnesses as to what was said and done in the hotel. And you—a paroled rustler, who had already busted that parole. West, you wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance."

"Yeah, that's true," admitted Sundown grimly. "You better go out in the car, Pelliser."

"Why?" asked Pelliser in surprise.

"You can't afford to mix into any trouble. If they discover me—I'm not goin' to take a chance on swingin'."

"You'd fight 'em, West?"

"I shore will. If they come in here——"

Sundown stopped. From outside came the familiar call:

"Abo-o-o-o-oard!"

The two men looked anxiously at each other. Several moments, longer than hours to them, passed, before the train jerked softly; and they were off for the south. Faster and faster went the passenger, clicking over the frogs and joints, gaining speed at it roared out along the peninsula.

"It looks as though we're lucky," said Pelliser. "Now it all depends on gettin' safe through Los Angeles."

He unlocked the door and the porter came in to make their berths.

"That sho' was a rumpus back theah," offered the porter "Man killed daid right on de platfo'm."

"Was he killed?" asked Sundown.

"Yassuh—shot daid. Nobody know where de bullet come f'om. I heaed somebody say dat de daid man's daughtah say she think somebody shoot f'om undah de cah. But she say she ain't suah. Mus' be somebody powahful anxious to kill dat man."

"Did yuh hear who he was?" asked Pelliser.

"No, sah; I didn' heah his name. De po-lice likely make lots of big noise and never fin' dat killah."

"They took the body back to the depot, didn't they?" asked Pelliser.

"Yassuh. I reckon dey fomes fo' the ambulance right 'way."

BACK in a hotel room a heartsick girl listened dazedly to two detectives, who were trying to gain some information from her. With them was a newspaper reporter, and sitting beside her was Jack Lance.

"I don't know," she repeated helplessly. "It was so sudden."

"Was the shot fired from beneath the car?" asked a detective.

"I think it was. I—I was walking ahead of Daddy. Oh, don't you see, I can't be sure!"

"What difference does it make, anyway?" asked Lance. "Why not let her alone for the night; let her get some rest."

The detective turned to Lance.

"You are foreman for the Priest ranches?"

"Yes."

"You were not going back with them tonight, eh?"

"No, I wasn't. Mr. Priest didn't intend leavin' tonight, until that trouble came up—the kidnappin' and the trouble with West. We don't get over here very often, yuh see—and I wasn't ready to go back. He knew it, and told me to stay a few days longer."

"I see. You know this man West?"

"I helped send him to the penitentiary for stealin' cattle."

"And still he saved Miss Priest from the kidnappers."

Lance laughed shortly. "I don't know much about that. Priest told West that he—that is, he intimated that West had a hand in the kidnappin', lost his nerve, double-crossed his pals and took a chance on a reward, rather than to try for a ransom."

"Is that your opinion, Mr. Lance?"

Lance shrugged his shoulders. *"Quien sabe?"*

"What does that mean?"

"Who knows?"

"I asked you what it meant."

"That's what it means—who knows?"

"Oh, I see. Have you any idea where West is living?"

Lance shook his head and turned to Rita.

"Did Sundown West tell you where he lived, Rita?"

Rita shook her head slowly.

"We'll find him, unless he's left the city."

"Take a little advice from me," said Lance. "Get him first, and tell him what it's all about afterwards."

"Dangerous, is he?"

"If he killed Judas Priest, you'll never take him alive."

"Just another little question," said the other detective. "Is it true that Miss Priest did not know West?"

"Miss Priest had been in the East, going to school, for a number of years," said Lance. "She was never in Yucca Valley while Sundown West was there."

"All right," said the detective. "Admitting that West had cause to hate Priest, and admitting that West may have known Priest and his daughter were in this city. Would he, even if he instigated the kidnapping of Miss Priest, hoping to shake down Mr. Priest for a nice piece of money, bring her back to her father and take a chance on *him* paying a reward?"

"That's what I said to Daddy," interposed Rita tearfully.

"I guess I'm not so smart after all," said the detective dryly. "And what did your father say, Miss Priest?"

"We changed the subject, I think."

"Do you think West had anything to do with the kidnapping?"

"I don't believe it. There were three men, all masked. But they were not dressed like Mr. West was. Two of them looked at me just a few minutes before he came. They wore black slickers. Mr. West was all wet and muddy. He didn't have any slicker. But he took one off the man on the floor, and wrapped me in it."

"Did he ask any questions, or talk much?"

"No, he never even asked my name."

"I guess that's all for tonight, Miss Priest."

A maid was sent up to take care of Rita, and the men went out.

"Will you ship the remains back to Arizona?" asked the reporter.

"Yes," said Lance briskly. "Just as soon as Miss Priest feels able to make the trip."

"You'll have to wait until after the inquest," said a detective.

"Oh, certainly, I understand that."

CHAPTER III

THE SHEEP KING

BULL HAGAR, the sheep king, was a gross figure of a man; two hundred and fifty pounds on the hoof, bull necked, bull voiced, and with the tendency of his namesake to smash his way through any obstacle. Black hair, a greasy, swarthy skin, small and nearly round black eyes, he sat across his desk in Moon City and looked steadily at Nick Pelliser.

"So that's how yuh hooked up with Sundown West, eh?" he growled.

"That's it," replied Pelliser. "I thought ——"

"You thought, eh?" growled Hagar.

"Listen, Bull; this Sundown West hates Priest and his outfit."

"Suppose he does? He don't hate Treadway. You've told him everythin' we're tryin' to do. That's fine! All he has to do is go over to Yucca Valley, tell Treadway all about it, and our skin is hung on the fence. Sundown West is a cowboy. He saved Priest's daughter. She's pretty. Priest is dead and she gets the layout. I'd be a damn fool to send West over there to queer my deal—which is workin' fine—now."

"What'll I tell him, Bull?"

"Send him in here; I'll tell him."

Pelliser sent Sundown into the office, but stayed out himself. Sundown had never met the big sheepman, but disliked him instinctively. Hagar looked Sundown over carefully.

"Well?" said Sundown.

"So yo're Sundown West, eh?"

"That's my name. I suppose yo're Bull Hagar."

"I reckon you've heard of me."

"Plenty."

"Never heard nothin' good of me, didja?"

"No."

Hagar laughed grimly. "At least, yo're not a damn liar, West."

"I didn't come in here to lie to yuh, Hagar."

Hagar looked at him keenly for several minutes.

"I'm not so sure of that," he said coldly.

Sundown's turquoise-blue eyes changed to tempered steel in a flash.

"Meanin' which?" he asked softly.

"Oh, don't go off half-cocked, West. This proposition Pelliser made yuh is all off."

"All off, eh?"

"Yeah. I've changed my mind about Yucca Valley. I did want to run sheep in there, but it ain't worth what it'll cost. Took me a long time to change my mind."

"Yeah," said Sundown, "and that means I don't get a job?"

"That's what it amounts to, West—unless yuh want to herd sheep."

"Thank yuh; I don't, Hagar."

"No, I didn't think yuh would. Pelliser's idea was all right; he didn't know I'd changed my mind. He tells me yuh didn't intend comin' back to Arizona, except for that job. Now, I'll play square with yuh and pay yore fare back to Frisco, if yuh want to go."

Sundown thought quickly. He and Pelliser had stopped in Gateway, in order for Sundown to report to the sheriff on his parole papers; so he was all right for thirty days. Hagar's offer looked like a very generous one, but it struck Sundown that there was something behind this unlooked for generosity. Bull Hagar wanted him out of the country.

"That's shore square of yuh, Hagar," replied Sundown. "Can yuh let that offer ride a couple days? I kinda want to loaf around and get the kinks out of my system."

"Yeah, I'll do that," agreed Hagar. "Yuh wasn't thinkin' of leavin' Moon City, was yuh? I mean, until yuh head for Frisco?"

"No, I thought I'd just loaf around here."

"Shore, thatt's all right. If yuh see Pelliser, tell him I want to see him, will yuh?"

PELLISER was outside the office. He did not question Sundown. They met on the street later in the day, but Pelliser did not mention anything about Sundown not getting the job with Hagar. He invited Sundown to have a drink with him, and as they stood at the bar, Pelliser said:

"Well, here's hopin' the weather is nice in Frisco, West."

"I'm just wonderin' if I'll go to Frisco," said Sundown.

"I believe I would, if I was you," replied Pelliser softly. Sundown looked quizzi-

cally at him, but Pelliser turned away and went across the room to watch a poker game.

"So that's the how of it, eh?" mused Sundown. "They want me out of things around here. Hagar lied, when he said he had given up the idea of sheepin' out Yucca Valley; and Pelliser is square enough to warn me to go to Frisco. It seems to me that Mr. Pelliser made a mistake when he took up with me in Frisco. And it just happens that Hagar has got some hired gunmen right here in Moon City."

Sundown left the saloon and wandered down the main street. A tired looking cowboy passed him and dismounted at a hitch-rack. He had his warbag tied across the back of his saddle, indicating that he was quitting a job, or heading for a new one.

He had tied his horse, as Sundown came up to the hitch-rack.

"Howdy, neighbor," he said, nodding to Sundown pleasantly.

"Quittin' or hirin'?" asked Sundown smiling.

"I'm quittin'," replied the cowboy dryly. "Been out on the 7UR for three months and I'm hankerin' for the bright lights."

Sundown smiled and looked at the horse.

"Sellin' out?" he asked. The cowboy looked critically at his own outfit.

"I might, at that. Good bronc, six year old, and that saddle is fine. Eighty dollars takes the outfit."

"C'mon over to my room and write me a bill-of-sale?"

The cowboy laughed joyously.

"Pardner, I'd go further than that to get myself eighty bucks. You lead the way."

Over in Sundown's room he wrote out a detailed bill-of-sale, and gladly pocketed his money.

"Just one favor I'm askin' of yuh," said Sundown. "Don't tell anybody yuh sold out to me."

"Pardner, I'm deef, dumb and blind. I tied my horse to the hitch-rack, and that's all I know."

"Thank yuh."

The cowboy went clattering down the stairs, anxious to get a chance to spend or lose all the money he had saved for three months, plus the price of his horse and saddle.

Sundown smiled, as he pocketed the bill-of-sale.

"Now if I can buy a pair of chaps, a belt and a holster, I'll be all set for travelin'," he told himself. "But I'll have to get out of Moon City, before that 7UR cowboy gets drunk enough to talk about sellin' me a horse and saddle."

Sundown sauntered down to the livery stable, where he hunched on his heels in the shade and opened a conversation with the keeper of the stable. The talk drifted around to cattle, and Sundown intimated that he might go out and strike the owner of the 7UR for a job.

"Yuh might," said the stableman dubiously. "Do yuh know Reach?"

"No, I ain't never met him."

"Uh-huh. They're a salty spread, that there 7UR; but yuh might hook onto a job—I dunno."

"I reckon I'll have to dig up some chaps," mused Sundown.

"I've got a couple pair I'll sell cheap," offered the man. "They ain't noways new, but they'll wear a long time."

They were just what Sundown wanted, and he bought one pair for a fifth of their original value. The man also sold him a belt and holster for more than they were worth, but Sundown didn't mind. He left the stuff at the stable, sauntered back to the hotel, where he paid his bill.

THEN he went back to the stable, put on his chaps and belt, walked over to the horse, mounted quickly and rode out of Moon City. He felt sure that no one had seen him leave. At least, he seemed to have attracted no attention. It felt good to have a horse between his knees again, and the saddle fit fine.

Straight down the road to Gateway he went, but once out of sight of Moon City, he reined to the left and headed toward the broken ranges which lay between Moon City and Yucca Valley. Sundown knew every inch of this country. He knew exactly where to strike the west end of the old Aztec Trail, an ancient pathway through the Moon Mountains, probably discovered by the Indians long before white men came.

Along this trail were hidden homes of the ancient cliff dwellers, unexplored by science. Sundown West had been there, his boots stirring the dust of ages. But he was not interested in cliff dwellings now.

He struck the trail, following it carefully. By hard riding he could reach Treadway's S Bar T ranch by dark. In places the trail led through narrow canyons, barely wide enough for a vheicle to pass, where the spires of sandstone, like the walls of huge buildings crowded in close together.

There were horse tracks at these narrow places, as though someone had used the trail. This fact worried Sundown a little. He came out into the more open spaces, and everything seemed all right, but where trail narrowed again he found more tracks; the marks of shod horses.

Still, there was no reason why a rider shouldn't use that trail. Sundown rode along, his horse traveling at a shuffling trot. He could see the higher reaches of the trail ahead, and it suddenly occurred to him how easy it would be for anyone up there with field glasses to spot a rider coming in over the trail.

"I'm gettin' to be an old lady," he told himself. "All I had to do was outsmart Bull Hagar, by gettin' safe out of Moon City."

The trail followed along the sharp slope of a hill, but twisted downward again into a deep, narrow canyon. Sundown remembered this canyon, with its many crooks and twists; and the memory of it made him uneasy. Was it a sixth sense, warning him of danger? He smiled grimly at his fears, as the horse worked its way over the rough slope, and slid his gun around to a more handy position.

"You blamed fool, yo're scared of shadows," he told himself.

They struck the fairly smooth floor of the canyon, where the soft sand muffled the footsteps of the horse. Sundown was watching the ears of his horse, as they drifted along, but suddenly stiffened in his saddle. The horse's ears had pricked up, and the animal was looking intently ahead.

Sundown's sharp eyes caught a flash of metal where the canyon turned. It was only a flash, possibly from a sunbeam on a silver concha, or the barrel of a gun. Sundown did not stop his horse, but with his dangling right hand he drew his gun, cocking it carefully, but making no motion that anyone ahead of him might construe as a move toward a defense.

Sundown wasn't sure it was an ambush, but he was taking no chances. Straight toward the corner he rode, ready for anything that might happen. He tightened his reins to prevent the horse from making any sudden move, whistling softly between his teeth.

But even with the tight rein he was unable to prevent the horse from whirling in against the canyon wall, when two men stepped out from a hiding place at the corner. They were not masked. One held a rifle ready, while the other held a revolver in his right hand.

BUT Sundown did not stop to ask questions nor to receive orders. As his horse whirled in against the canyon wall, he fired pointblank at the man with the rifle. They were not over fifteen feet apart. His action was so swift that his ambushers were taken by complete surprise, and his second shot rattled the canyon walls, before the man with the revolver realized what had happened.

The man with the rifle had dropped his weapon and fallen against the wall,

where he was clawing with both hands, trying to keep upright, while the man with the revolver staggered around with a bullet in his right shoulder, his gun clattering on the rocky floor.

It was all over in five seconds. Sundown spurred his frightened horse past the wounded man, whirled the animal around and looked the man over calmly. The first man was down, the other leaning weakly against the wall glowering impotently at Sundown.

"Gosh, yo're sudden," he said weakly.

"Yuh got to be sudden around here," replied Sundown grimly. "If I hadn't got you, you'd have got me."

The man winced from pain, as he shook his head.

"We wasn't goin' to shoot yuh."

"Until yuh found out I was Sundown West, eh? How long ago did Bull Hagar send yuh in here to dry-gulch me?"

"This mornin'—we came in."

"To stop me from goin' through, eh?"

"Use yore own imagination, feller. Gosh, you got Finney cold!"

"Yeah, and I'd have got you cold, too, if my horse hadn't been tryin' to climb the wall. Where's yore horses?"

"Back around the turn."

"Can you ride to Moon City?"

"I'll make it. If I can't, I can make a signal to bring help. Don't mind me—I'll git along."

Sundown nodded slowly. "I'm wonderin' if Hagar's got any more of you dry-gulchers between here and Yucca Valley."

"I don't reckon he figured you was so tough he'd have to send in an army to stop yuh."

"Well, give him my regards, will yuh?"

Sundown rode around the corner and replaced the empty shells in his gun as he rode along. He felt that he should have helped the wounded man back to a doctor, but he would have been taking long chances on his own life. He felt no twinge of conscience in having killed a man. It was all in the game.

From far up along the trail he looked back at a long, thin column of smoke, apparently being sent up from the top of a high cliff. The streamer of smoke was cut off. In a few moments it arose again. It was the old Apache smoke-talk. Someone in Moon City was probably reading a signal of distress. Sundown smiled grimly, and wondered how the wounded man had strength enough to climb up there and send that signal, working one-handed with a blanket to break the puffs of smoke.

The sun was getting low now, and Sundown knew he was still a long way from the S Bar T ranch. The last part of the trail was the worst; very difficult to follow in the dark.

"She shore looks like a dry camp for me and you tonight," he told his horse. "We can't take no chances on bustin' our legs in the dark."

Chapter IV

BULL HAGAR WASTES NO TIME

PALMVILLE, the one town in Yucca Valley, was just big enough to support one store, post-office, a hotel of sorts, two saloons and a blacksmith shop. It was twenty miles from the railroad at Gateway, and the valley was really controlled by Priest's big outfit, and the smaller one, owned by Steve Treadway. Nesters had come and nesters had gone, because Judas Priest and his riders did not favor having small ranchers cutting up the range.

Palmville had one street and no palms. No one could ever remember that there had ever been any palms in the place, unless you cared to mention the Joshua-trees, sometimes known as palms, but commonly called Dancing Jaspers. Every day the stage made a round trip from Palmville to Gateway and return. It was twenty

miles, and the nearest railway point. Yucca Valley was not the most beautiful spot on earth, but it was a cattleman's paradise. There were but two entrances into the valley, the one at Gateway and Aztec Pass. The hills were so impassable that even the range cattle and wild horses did not range them; and the upper half of the valley was surrounded by a gigantic rim.

The preparations for the funeral of Judas Priest were finished. The body lay in state at the stage station, where it would be held until the morrow, and Rita had been in town, attending to the final details. Jack Lance and Ike Carver, one of the JP cowboys, had ridden to Gateway early that morning to arrange for a minister and to see about ordering an appropriate headstone.

Rita wanted to see John Ames, her father's attorney, who had been out of town, when they came through Gateway, and she had told Lance to tell Ames to come to the ranch that day if possible. Lance had handled all the details of shipping the body from San Francisco, and came with Rita.

Several days had elapsed since her father had been killed, and Rita had recovered somewhat from the blow. Everyone had been very kind to her, offering all sorts of advice, but she wanted to have a talk with old John Ames, whose advice would be worth taking. He and her father had been close friends for many years, and the old lawyer handled all the legal work for the Priest interests. Her father had always said that John Ames was too honest to be a successful lawyer.

Rita had never known him very well, but her father had often told her that in case anything serious happened to him she could rely absolutely on John Ames. The serious had happened, and she did want honest advice.

Old "Swan River Pete" Hooker, cook and absolute monarch of the JP ranch, brought Rita to Palmville that day. Except for Rita, Swan River was the chief mourner for Judas Priest. Swan River had been a wild cowboy in his day, but exposure, hard work, and the wear and tear of life had crippled the old man; and Judas Priest, knowing Swan River's ability as king of the chuck wagons, had given the old rawhider a good job and a home for life.

Swan River was cast iron and whalebone. Whisky had to be worse than bad to make an impression on him. Sixty years old, twisted a little from bronco riding, irascible as a worried badger, and with a vitriolic tongue, he bossed the kitchen and the rest of the house at the JP, made everybody stay in their places, and swore that when God made Judas Priest, He busted the mould. Few people could subscribe to Swan River's sentiments; but that was his opinion, and he'd fight anybody that disagreed.

SWAN RIVER was very morose when he drove the cream-colored buckboard team out of Palmville, taking Rita back home.

"Everythin' set, Rita?" he asked.

The girl nodded slowly. "I hope Jack found the minister at home; and I do hope he found Mr. Ames."

"Yeah," grunted Swan River. "Yuh know, I jist been a-thinkin' of somethin', Rita. You own the JP now. Lock, stock and barrel, she's yours."

"Yes, Swan River," she said softly. "Mr. Ames has daddy's will."

"Uh-huh. Well, she's a mighty nice spread, this old JP. Ain't nothin' better this side of Madygascar, I don't reckon."

"Where is that, Swan River?"

"Madygascar? Hell, I dunno. It's one of them furrin settlements."

"Were you ever there, Swan River?"

"Me? Well, yea-a-ah, I—no-o-o, I wasn't either. No, I never did git all the way over there. Started all right, but I got kicked off a train at Yuma. Yessir, I did. I'd have walked, but I couldn't find a damn person that knowed which way it was. I never met so many iggerent folks

in my life. Hm-m-m-m! They shore didn't know much."

Rita smiled softly. She knew all about Swan River.

"Funny thing about you bein' kidnapped in Frisco," said the old man. "Sounds jist like a book I read oncet."

Rita knew that Swan River didn't even know one letter from another.

"It was rather queer," replied Rita.

"And you bein' found by that damn Sundown West. I tell yuh, that beats anythin' I've ever knowed of."

"Did you know Sundown West?" asked Rita.

"I shore knowed that hombre, y'betcha. He's a upstandin' young man, plenty previous on the trigger, which ain't no sin, but with a hankerin' for other folks' cows. I tell yuh, I damn near liked that kid."

"Did you, Swan River?"

"Yeah, but I didn't git far with it. But the funny part of it all, is that sendin' Sundown West to the pen for rustlin' cows didn't stop rustlin'."

"It didn't stop it? Swan River, do you mean that rustling has continued?"

"I'll tell yuh somethin', Rita. Your paw and me was cronies. Jist a few weeks before you went to Frisco, me and him talked over things. He said to me, says he, 'Swan River, we're bein' robbed. It ain't nothin' I can put my finger onto, but we're losin' cows.' I asked him if he said anythin' to the sheriff, but he jist laughed and said there ain't nothin' definite to go on. I asked him why he didn't have a talk with Jack Lance and the boys and have 'em keep their eyes open, and he said he prob'ly would."

"I'm glad it didn't stop when they sent Sundown West away," said Rita.

"Glad? Whatcha glad about? We're losin' cattle!"

"That is right," she nodded. "We must stop it."

"Uh-huh. Mind if I ask yuh a personal question?"

"Why, no, Swan River."

"You goin' to wed with Jack Lance?"

"No, I am not going to marry Jack Lance."

"Uh-huh."

"Why did you ask me that question?"

"Well, I heard yuh was, and I wanted to be sure."

They drove along silently for a while. A short distance more and they would turn off the Gateway road on the one that led to the JP ranch. The road crossed a dry wash and twisted around through a bunch of mesquite. Suddenly Swan River drew up the team, setting them back heavily.

RIGHT in front of them lay a man, flat on his back in the middle of the road, and standing over him, holding the reins of his horse, was Sundown West. For several moments no one spoke nor made a move. Sundown's eyes shifted from Rita to Swan River Pete, who got heavily out of the buckboard, handed the lines to Rita and came slowly over to Sundown.

"It's Ames, the lawyer from Gateway," said Sundown. "He's been shot twice."

"Who shot him?" asked Swan River bluntly.

"I dunno; I just found him."

Ames had been prosecuting attorney at the time Sundown had been convicted, but his term had expired shortly afterwards.

Swan River turned back, led the team off the road and tied them to a snag. Rita got out of the buckboard and came over to the body.

"This is terrible," she said sadly. "He was coming to see me today."

Sundown nodded, as he looked down at the body. Here were the tracks, where a buggy had swerved off the road. Sundown followed the tracks through an opening in a thicket and found the horse and buggy. One wheel had been smashed, the shafts splintered; but the horse, barring a few scratches, was unharmed. Sundown stripped off the broken harness and tied the animal to a tree.

Swan River and Rita were talking together at the buckboard, when Sundown came back.

"Are you goin' to Palmville?" asked Swan River.

"I was headin' that way," replied Sundown. "Why?"

"Will yuh tell 'em what happened to Ames? Somebody will be willin' to come down here and guard the body. I'll take Rita home, and then go to Gateway and notify the sheriff."

"All right," nodded Sundown. But as he walked over to mount his horse, two riders appeared from the south.

"By golly, here comes the sheriff and deputy now!" exclaimed Swan River. "This shore is luck!"

Tom Smalley, the sheriff, was a short, pudgy man, deadly serious in everything, and looking like an animated toad-stool in his huge sombrero. Arkansaw Pickert, his deputy, made up for any physical shortness in the sheriff's office. Arkansaw was six-feet-six-inches tall and weighed a bare one hundred and fifty pounds.

Neither man spoke, until they had examined the body of Ames. Then the round-faced sheriff shoved his hands deep in his pockets and demanded to know what it was all about. Sundown told him of finding the body, and Swan River added that Sundown was standing beside the body, when he drove up.

"How'd you happen to be comin' along here, West?" asked the sheriff.

"I was on my way to town from the S Bar T."

"Yeah? You stayin' with Treadway now?"

"I had breakfast there, Smalley."

"Breakfast, eh?"

"Yeah. I left Moon City yesterday, comin' in over the Aztec Trail. But I left too late and had to make a dry camp; so I didn't get to the S Bar T until this mornin'."

"All this talkin' ain't tellin' us who killed Ames," reminded Arkansaw drawlingly.

The sheriff looked quizzically at Sundown.

"What's yore opinion, West?" he asked.

"My opinion is that you better find out why anybody would kill John Ames. I don't know what has been done around here for two years."

"That's plenty true," nodded the sheriff. "Arkansaw, you go to the JP ranch with Miss Rita and Swan River. They'll lend yuh a team and a light wagon to haul the body back to Gateway."

"We certainly will," replied Rita.

"Where you goin', West?" asked the sheriff.

"I'm goin' to Palmville to find Steve Treadway."

"Are yuh aimin' to be around here a while?"

"I think so; why?"

"We'll need yuh for the inquest, yuh see."

"Oh, I'll be around here at least that long."

SUNDOWN mounted his horse, lifted his hat to Rita, and rode on up the highway toward Palmville. The sheriff walked over to the buckboard and said to Rita, "I got some of the story of what happened in Frisco," he said. "Wasn't the police lookin' for Sundown West?"

Rita slowly adjusted her gloves, before she replied, "Why should they?"

"Well, I just asked," smiled the sheriff. "Thank yuh, Miss Priest."

While the sheriff waited for Arkansaw to return with the wagon, he examined the smashed buggy, and later searched the

pockets of the dead lawyer, which contained a few dollars in money, a knife and a handkerchief. There were no letters nor papers. Ames had been shot twice, and either bullet would have proved fatal.

John Ames had made enemies. He had

been an inflexible prosecutor in the court, but a fine tempered gentleman, kindly and sympathetic outside his duties. Tom Smalley, the sheriff, liked Ames, and felt that his death would be a big loss to the county. But Tom Smalley was not a detective.

Arkansaw Pickert came back with the wagon, and they rode down to Gateway, taking the body home.

"Do yuh think Sundown West had anythin' to do with it?" asked the sheriff. Arkansaw spat thoughtfully.

"I dunno. He said he was a-comin' from the S Bar T."

"Mebbe he met Ames. If yuh remember, Ames was pretty bitter with Sundown at that trial."

"Yeah. He's been bitter with a lot of 'em, Tom. Ames didn't have no gun. I dunno what the penitentiary does to a feller, but when Sundown went away, I'd say he wouldn't shoot an unarmed man. It's shore funny. Priest accused Sundown of rustlin'—and Priest is dead. Ames prosecuted Sundown—and now he's dead."

"I'll keep an eye on Sundown West," said the sheriff.

"Yeah, you'll raise hell keepin' an eye on him."

PALMVILLE had not changed since Sundown West last had seen it. Towns like Palmville merely grow older, more dilapidated with the passing of time. Sundown tied his horse in front of the Yucca Saloon. Steve Treadway and Chuckwalla Sands, one of his cowboys, saw Sundown from inside the saloon, and came out to meet him.

Treadway was of medium height, slightly gray, but straight as an arrow. Treadway had been a great rider and roper in his youth, and still was all whalebone and rawhide. He and Sundown shook hands silently.

"Hyah, Sundown," grinned Chuckwalla. "Glad yo're back."

He shook hands with Sundown, who told them what had happened down the road.

"John Ames!" exclaimed Treadway. "Well, can yuh beat that? Shot twice?"

"Both of 'em dead center," replied Sundown.

The three men leaned against the hitch-rack.

"Why didn't yuh come back here, instead of goin' to Frisco?" asked Treadway.

"Oh, you heard about me bein' down there, eh?"

"Shore. Some folks around here seem to think you had a hand in the shootin' of Judas Priest. None of 'em said that to me though."

Sundown laughed shortly. "I was mad enough to shoot him—but I didn't, Steve. I'll tell yuh all yuh ain't heard later. I just came from Moon City. Started late, made a dry camp, and Barney gave me a breakfast at yore place."

"I should hope he would, Sundown. But what the devil was you doin' at Moon City?"

"Oh, I was tryin' to get Bull Hagar to send me over to negotiate with yuh. It seems he wants to send sheep through Aztec Pass."

Steve Treadway's eyes narrowed, as he looked at Sundown.

"Tell me somethin' more about that, will yuh?"

"It's quite a little story, Steve."

"All right; let's go out to the ranch and talk it over out there."

"Might be the best thing to do."

"I happen to know it is," said Steve grimly. "Some of that damn Priest outfit have been tellin' what will happen to you, if yuh ever come back to Yucca Valley. It was whispered that you throwed in with Bull Hagar."

"I tried to," laughed Sundown, as he untied his horse. "Bull's a queer jigger."

"Plenty queer," agreed Chuckwalla Sands.

IKE CARVER who had gone with Jack Lance to arrange for Priest's funeral came back from Gateway alone. He told Rita that the minister hadn't come back

to Gateway yet, and Lance was waiting for him. Ike had met the sheriff and deputy with the body, and they had told him about the murder.

"That's awful," said Ike. "Why, me and Jack talked with him this mornin'. It jist goes to show that yuh never can tell. Did Smalley have any idea who killed him?"

Rita shook her head sadly. "I don't suppose he has."

"Smalley never had a idea in his whole life," said Swan River.

"And yuh found Sundown West with the body, eh?"

"What of it, Ike?" asked Rita sharply.

"Oh, nothin'—I just wondered." He winked at Swan River and went away.

"What do you think, Swan River?" asked Rita seriously.

"As a thinker, I'm a pretty fair cook, Rita," he replied. "I liked John Ames jist fine and I'd like to see his killer punished—but I'd shore want to be awful shore, before I'd accuse anybody."

"So would I; and I don't believe Sundown West had anything to do with it."

"Mebbe not. But if he didn't, who did?"

Rita shook her head.

"Another thing," said Swan River seriously. "John Ames made out yore father's will. You'll own all this JP outfit, Rita; every darn stick of it."

"I wonder where that will is now," said Rita. "Dad must have left it with Mr. Ames."

"Well, I dunno about that part of it. But I do know he made out a new one jist before you folks went to Frisco. He told me he was makin' a newone. Yuh see," Swan River coughed apologetically, "he told me that you and Jack was goin' to git married."

"I know he did—but that is all over."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'll tell yuh; Jack's a fine feller and all that, but marryin' him is somethin' else ag'in. He's hot-headed, I know that."

"We won't discuss his shortcomings," smiled Rita. "None of us are perfect."

"I used to think I was," said Swan River seriously. "But I reckon I was mistaken. Well, I better mix up a little dough and kinda get ready for supper."

Chapter V

FRIENDS AND ENEMIES MIX

OVER at the S Bar T, Sundown West and Steve Treadway sat on the porch and watched the afternoon shadows lengthen. Sundown's story had interested Treadway.

"I'd like to have seen the expression on Bull Hagar's face, when his two men showed up in Moon City. So yuh got Finney, eh? Good riddance. He was a killer, Finney was. And yore description of the other one sounds like Keller. Anyway, Keller was plenty *amigo* to Finney.

"I know about Pelliser very well. He used to trail with a bad gang down around Laredo. I knew he was with Hagar, but I didn't know what he was doin' over there. It's my opinion that one of Hagar's outfit got Priest. They'd know that the girl would inherit the JP, and she'd be easier to handle than the old man. That kidnappin' must have been jist a city gang, who knew Judas Priest had plenty money."

"Yeah, I reckon it was, Steve," nodded Sundown. "Didja ever know a feller called 'Bugs'?"

"Bugs?" Steve laughed shortly. "I used to know a feller called Bugs. It was Bugs Hinkey, and he worked for the 7UR outfit, out there north of Moon City. He was over there when you was sent up, Sundown. Mebbe you never met him, though. Great big jeezer, kinda fat headed lookin'."

"Why, that sounds like the feller I socked on the head in that kidnapper's shack."

"Yea-a-ah? Name was Bugs?"

"I guess it was. If I ever see him again, he'll be packin' a scar on his head. Is it true that Priest's outfit watches the rim and the Aztec Pass?"

"Yeah, they do. It's all right with me.

Jack Lance came over and had a talk with me about it. He knew how things was between me and Priest, and he didn't want any trouble. They wanted to watch the Pass, but they'd about have to cross my land to get there. I gave 'em permission. Hell, it was to my advantage. Lance talked plenty sheep, but he didn't scare me. They'd have to bring their damn woolies over Aztec Pass. I've been all set for Mr. Hagar, Sundown. For over a year, I've had an ace in the hole. With the JP outfit watchin' things, ready to yell wolf at any sign of sheep, I've got it fixed so that Bull Hagar nor nobody else could ever get through the pass."

"I'm glad yuh have," replied Sundown. "I'd hate to see sheep in Yucca Valley."

"What are you goin' to do, Sundown?" asked Treadway.

"I dunno. They branded me a rustler and sent me to prison. Yuh can talk all yuh want to, but things like that take the heart out of yuh. I had a good start in here, Steve. If Priest's outfit had let me alone, I'd have been darn near independent now. But I'm not kickin' about what I lost. If I could prove that I wasn't guilty, I'd be satisfied. But hell, yuh can't do that. When a judge and jury say yo're guilty, you almost believe it yourself."

"I'm sure that somebody misbranded them calves with yore mark," said Steve. "It was done by Priest's orders, I think. He wanted to run yuh off the range."

SUNDOWN nodded grimly. "Yeah, and I was fool enough to get mad and sock some lead through Len Harris, when he called me a thief. But it was an even break, Steve. I'm glad he didn't die."

"Why not make a start somewhere else?" asked Treadway.

"Not with parole papers in my pocket. I'd look fine, tryin' to start a herd of my own. Everybody that ever lost a calf would come over and ask me where it went. Why, Steve, I wouldn't be surprised if they tried to put the deadwood on me for the murder of John Ames. They'd say I came back to get him for sendin' me over the road, jist like they're sayin' I came back to kill Judas Priest."

"I know," nodded Treadway. "And Priest even accused you of kidnappin' the girl."

"He shore did. Oh, I could prove that I didn't shoot him. That is, I could prove it by Pelliser; and have a cowtown jury hang me for tryin' to prove an alibi by a sheepherder."

"That's right. I'm wonderin' what Pelliser was doin' over there in Frisco, right in the same hotel with Priest."

"He said he wasn't stayin' there at that hotel; and that he was in Frisco to market some sheep for Hagar. When he put his cards on the table, I was willin' to even work for a sheepman to get even with Priest. Yuh see, Pelliser explained that I was to come over here and make a deal with you. My impression was that Hagar wanted to buy you out, and that I was to make the deal for him, because the JP outfit would never suspect that I'd be over here for Hagar. I was willin' to do that, Steve. But Hagar was scared of me, I reckon."

"He's goin' to love yuh, too," grinned Treadway, as he got to his feet. "I reckon it's time to wash for supper."

THE funeral of Judas Priest was the biggest ever held in the Valley. Treadway's outfit came, and with them came Sundown West. Many came from Gateway. The sheriff and deputy were there. Jack Lance scowled at Sundown, as the sonorous-voiced minister read the burial service at the grave.

"West has plenty of nerve," said Lance to Rita, as they left the cemetery.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Comin' to the funeral. It wasn't out of respect for your father—he came to gloat."

"Why do you hate him so?" asked Rita.

"Because he's no good, Rita. He's out on parole, we know that now. One crooked move on his part, and back he goes."

"He was mighty nice to me," said Rita, "and that is something I shall never forget."

"It may seem that he was," smiled Jack.

They stopped in the town. Rita had a few purchases to make, and Jack left her alone. Sundown West was coming out of the store, as she came in. For a few moments they looked at each other.

"Thank you for coming to the funeral," she said simply.

"I don't need any thanks for doin' that," replied Sundown. "It's the least we can do for anyone we knew."

"That is true," nodded Rita. "But under the circumstances, no one could blame you if you hadn't come."

"No, I don't reckon they could," admitted Sundown. "But after all, don't the Bible say somethin' about forgivin' those who trespass against yuh."

Rita looked keenly at him. "Do you mean that my father trespassed against you, Mr. West?"

"Yes'm, I reckon he did."

"Knowing that he was in the wrong?"

"I don't say that, Miss Priest. But when it came to me, yore father wasn't a hard man to convince of anythin'. But that's forgotten. It wasn't any pleasure for me to stand there and see him buried. Judas Priest played the game in his own way. Mebbe the rules he played under wasn't exactly clear—I dunno. You loved yore dad, and he loved you; and that's all that mattered between you."

"And you are not bitter toward him?"

"No. Even if he was still alive, I don't reckon I'd be bitter toward him. He sent me to prison, and I believe he thought I deserved it. That day in Frisco I was mad enough to kill him for what he hinted about me havin' a hand in kidnappin' you."

"I know," nodded the girl sadly.

"Why, if I had known you was Judas Priest's daughter, I'd never showed up at that hotel. And I want yuh to know that I didn't come there, hopin' to get a reward—I just wanted to see you again."

Rita looked away for a moment. "Are you going to stay here in the Valley?" she asked.

"Mebbe a few days."

Tom Smalley, the sheriff, came in past them, stopped and turned to Sundown.

"Be in Gateway at noon tomorrow, West; we'll be holdin' the Ames inquest right after noon."

"I'll be there, Tom," replied Sundown. "What size gun was he shot with?"

"A forty-five."

"That's what I shoot."

Smalley looked curiously at Sundown and went on toward the back of the store.

"Why did you say that?" asked Rita.

"Because it's true," smiled Sundown, "and it saved the sheriff the trouble of askin' me."

"But you didn't have anything to do with the shooting of Mr. Ames."

"I didn't steal cattle from your father, but they sent me to prison for it," replied Sundown.

"I'm sorry," said Rita simply.

"Thank yuh, Miss Priest."

"Will you come out to the ranch some day?"

"No, ma'am, I don't reckon I will. But that's all right, and thank yuh just the same."

Sundown walked away, hat in hand, as Lance came across the street.

THE inquest in Gateway did not bring out any evidence to show who might have murdered John Ames. Many came to hear the testimony of Sundown West, the paroled convict, who had discovered the body. Sundown's testimony satisfied the coroner and sheriff, but many meaning glances exchanged by the crowd showed that in their opinion Sundown West had

evened the score with John Ames for sending him to prison.

Sundown realized that, and after the inquest he had a talk with the sheriff about it.

"Well, I'll tell yuh, Sundown," said Smalley. "If I was you I'd pull out of this part of the state. You're too well known around here, and you'll always be under suspicion for somethin'."

"And still," said Sundown firmly, "I'm goin' to stay. Steve Treadway has offered me a job, and I'm goin' to see if I can't dig up evidence to prove I never misbranded them cows."

"Hop to it," yawned the sheriff. "Yo're bitin' off a big chaw, Sundown."

"I've got a wide mouth, Smalley."

Gateway, by virtue of being the county seat and main railway point in the valley, was quite a town; and was cosmopolitan enough for both cattlemen and sheepmen to appear on the streets without clashing.

Sundown left the sheriff's office and sauntered down the street. He knew that Rita was in town, because she was at the inquest, and he wondered if he would see her. He met Arkansaw Pickert and the deputy told him that the prosecuting attorney had opened John Ames' safe, and that Rita and Lance were up at his office.

"I think it's somethin' about Priest's will," said Arkansaw. "Somebody was talkin' about it at the court-house. Ames handled all of the law business for the JP outfit."

"He shore *handled* my end of it," laughed Sundown.

He went on down the street, and was starting to enter a saloon, when Bull Hagar and Nick Pelliser stepped out. Sundown nearly collided with the big sheepman.

"Howdy, Hagar," said Sundown smiling. Hagar blinked thoughtfully.

"So you're down here, eh?" he growled. "I thought you was goin' to stick around Moon City a while."

"You mean you thought you was goin' to *make* me stick around."

"Nobody sat on yore shirt-tail, did they?"

"Whose fault was it that they didn't?"

Bull Hagar shifted the cigar between his big teeth, as he came in closer to Sundown.

"Listen to me, West," he said huskily. "Keep yore nose out of my business—or yuh won't have any nose. Even Yucca Valley will be one hot place for you, if yuh only know it. Sing small, feller."

Sundown laughed in his face.

"Yo're jist a bug-headed shepherd that growed fat, Hagar."

Pelliser stepped in between them, and Hagar moved back.

"Don't be a pair of fools," warned Pelliser. "You can't start any brawls here in Gateway. Have a little sense."

"That's right," nodded Sundown.

"Then you keep out of my business," warned Hagar.

"What is yore business—dry-gulchin' cowpunchers, Hagar?"

"C'mon, Hagar," urged Pelliser. "You can't afford to start a riot here."

"All right," agreed Hagar grudgingly, and walked away with Pelliser.

STEVE TREADWAY had been standing just inside the doorway, where he could hear some of the conversation, and when Sundown came in they walked to the bar together.

"Was you tryin' to rib up a fight with Bull?" asked Treadway.

"No, I just wanted him to know that I knew he tried to have me bulshwhacked. I don't reckon I'd ever make a diplomat."

"No, I don't reckon yuh would. Hagar would like to see that Ames killin' hung onto you, Sundown. I heard him talkin' at the bar. When he seen me and knew I'd heard some of it, him and Pelliser shut up."

"Pelliser is nobody's fool," said Sundown. "I expect that Hagar will try to start trouble for me, and I'm not worryin'; but I don't want to get you in any trouble, Steve."

"You forget that end of it. If Bull Hagar tries to pack trouble into the Valley, I'll be there to greet him. Well, here's to crime."

As they drank, Swan River Pete came in. The old JP cook looked at Treadway and Sundown, moved in near them and spun a silver dollar on the bar.

"I'll buy both of yuh a drink," he said. "I'm so damn mad that I'd buy yuh a drink, even if I don't like yuh. What'll yuh have?"

Treadway looked at the old man, a quizzical smile on his lean face.

"What's eatin' you, Swan River?" he asked.

"Me an' you is enemies, Treadway," he said. "We've been thataway a long time, and I hadn't ort to even talk to yuh. But I'm mad. I'm so damn—gimme straight whisky and no wash. I've jist been up in the court-house, listenin' to a damn lawyer read Judas Priest's will."

"What was wrong with it?" asked Treadway.

"Here's a go. Well," Swan River gulped his whisky, "he left me one thousand dollars in cash and a lifetime job at the JP."

"Hell, that hadn't ought to make yuh mad."

"It didn't. That part of it was both fine and unexpected. But by the twisted-toed god of the Aztec, if he didn't go to work and give Jack Lance one-half of the JP outfit."

"No!"

"I ain't lyin', Treadway. He gives Rita all the money in the banks and all the stocks and bonds he owns, along with one-half of the ranch. It said somethin' about Jack Lance goin' to be his son-in-law—all of which ain't noways true. Now, can yuh beat that?"

"Wasn't Rita goin' to marry Lance?" asked Treadway.

"Yeah, she was; but they busted up durin' that Frisco trip, and the old man made out the will before they left."

"Well, I'll be danged!" marveled Treadway. "Jack Lance gets half of the JP, even if he don't get the girl. What does she think about it?"

"How'd you feel about it, if you was in her place?"

"I'd feel like hell."

"That's jist exactly how she feels. Well, I've got to take her home."

"Have another drink?" asked Sundown.

"No, thank yuh. If we ever git friendly, I'll collect that one, West."

FOR the next few days Sundown forgot his troubles in hard work. They were branding calves, and Sundown's roping ability amazed the cowboys, who had never seen the red-headed cowboy swing a loop. Steve Treadway had always believed in Sundown, and the more he talked with him the more he realized that the JP outfit had framed the charge against Sundown.

They were finishing the fourth day of branding, when Rita and Swan River Pete drove in at the S Bar T. It was the first time Rita had ever been there, and the old cook had not been there for years. Treadway left the corral and walked up to where they had stopped their buckboard team.

"I don't reckon you ever expected to see us over here, Steve," said Swan River.

"Well," smiled the boss of the S Bar T, "yo're both mighty welcome."

"Thank you, Mr. Treadway," said Rita nervously. "I—I wanted to talk with you."

"Won't yuh come up to the house?"

"Thank you."

"Mebbe I better stay here," suggested Swan River. "Yuh know, I git so damn mad."

"No, you better come along," replied Rita. "Is Mr. West here?"

"Yeah, he's down at the corral. Do yuh want him?"

"I thought he might have an idea, Mr. Treadway."

Steve smiled to himself, as he called Sundown, who coiled up his rope, tossed it

aside and came up to the porch. He smiled at Rita and nodded to Swan River.

"Well, how's everythin' over at the JP?" asked Treadway.

"Not as good as it might be," replied Rita. Steve and Sundown exchanged glances.

"No, and I'll tell yuh another thing; somebody watched us come over here," said Swan River angrily.

"Watched yuh come over here?" queried Steve. "Whose business is it what you do?"

"Did you hear about my father's will?" asked Rita.

"Swan River told us some of it that day in Gateway," replied Sundown.

"Did he tell you that Dad gave Jack Lance half of the JP?"

"Yeah, we knew that," nodded Steve.

"And thereby hangs trouble," said the old cook.

"It could," agreed Steve. "Fifty-fifty is a poor division."

"Poor Dad meant well," said Rita. "He thought I was going to marry Jack Lance, and Dad was very fond of Jack. He was so happy, when he thought we were going to get married. I suppose that was why he gave us each half of the ranch.

"And he was so disappointed when I told him I had broken the engagement. But that is not what I came to talk with you about. It may seem queer for me to come and talk with you, Mr. Treadway."

THERE ain't no reason why we can't be friends, Miss Priest."

"That's what I was a-tellin' her," said Swan River.

"I have a feeling that Swan River is the only one on the ranch I can absolutely trust," said Rita sadly. "The others are friends of Jack. This morning Jack came to me and begged me to marry him. I told him that it was impossible, and he got angry. When I refused to discuss the matter any further, he said that I'd either marry him, or he would sell his half of the ranch. He said he couldn't—that we couldn't go on running the ranch as partners.

"I told him to go ahead and sell his half, but that I would have to agree on the buyer. He laughed at me and said we had no agreement to that effect, and that I couldn't stop him from selling to anyone. Then I asked him if he had anyone interested in buying his half, and he said he knew he could get a good price from Bull Hagar."

"The dirty coyote!" added Swan River.

"So that's his idea, eh?" said Treadway. "What's the matter with him—has he gone plumb crazy? Sell out to Bull Hagar!"

"Bull would prob'ly pay him a good price," said Sundown.

"Certainly," nodded Steve. "But I don't believe he'd dare do that. He's tryin' to scare yuh into marryin' him, Miss Priest."

"But suppose he would sell to Hagar?"

"Then," replied Steve grimly, "we'd have to kill Bull Hagar and all his heirs and assigns forever and forever."

"It might require a lot of killin's," said Swan River.

"Yeah, but it would keep out a lot of sheep," replied Steve.

"I'd just like to know *how* Jack Lance knows Bull Hagar would buy half of the JP," said Sundown.

"Oh, he knows danged well that Hagar would pay well to get a foothold in Yucca Valley," said Steve.

"Well, you know the story now," sighed Rita.

"I'm mighty glad yuh came over and told me, Miss Priest. It's my own opinion that Lance is usin' Bull Hagar as a club, tryin' to scare you into marryin' him."

"That may be true," replied Rita seriously. "But it makes things bad at home. I have a feeling that they're all against me, except Swan River."

"And Lance knows darn well we came over here," added Swan River. "It was either Ike Carver or Perry Roush, who follered us."

"You'll be losin' yore job," smiled Treadway.

"No, I won't; I've got a job for life. But I hope I don't live long enough to see Bull Hagar and his sheep over here. No-sir, the job don't worry me none; I'm worried about Rita's half of the JP, with Lance and his gang against her."

"That does make it awful tough," admitted Treadway. "It's no job for a woman, any old way yuh look at it. But I wouldn't worry about Lance. He's bluffin'. I never did like Jack, but I don't think he's crooked enough to play that sort of a game. Anyway, he won't hurt yuh personally, Miss Priest. Go back and wait for him to make a move. He won't be in a hurry."

"All right," replied Rita. "It makes me feel better to have told you about it."

"Makes me feel better, too," said Treadway. "And if you can use me and my gang, jist yell for us."

"Thank you so much, Mr. Treadway."

"If we're goin' to be friends, yuh might call me Steve."

"I hope we will be, Steve."

"We shore will be, Rita."

She shook hands with Steve and Sundown, and drove away.

"Now don't that beat hell a mile?" queried Steve, as they watched the buckboard disappear. "Jack Lance is worse than I thought he was."

Sundown nodded seriously, as he rolled a smoke.

"Judas Priest was one awful fool for makin' a will like that."

"That's right, Sundown. Why didn't he wait until they was married."

"Why?" muttered Sundown thoughtfully. "Priest wasn't a fool. But if he wasn't, why did he do the biggest fool thing on earth?"

"I dunno," sighed Treadway. "It takes all kinds of folks to make a world, I reckon."

"Let's go back and wrestle a few more dogies," suggested Sundown, and they walked back to the corral, where Joe Parker, Chuckwalla Sands and Jimmy Fultz were branding.

Chapter VI

"Whiskyitis"

WHEN Arkansaw Pickert felt the need of more whisky than usual, he always managed to find an excuse to get away from Gateway. It was against his principles to get drunk in his own town; so this time he came to Palmville.

The long, lean deputy had a superiority complex regarding the amount of liquor he could consume, while, as a matter of fact, he was not a good single-handed drinker. He always removed his badge of office and shoved it deep in his pocket.

"I may get drunk, but not officially," he declared.

Old Swan River Pete was in Gateway, and Arkansaw found him at the stage office, where Swan River and several more men were loading a small gasoline engine into a JP wagon. Swan River explained that it had been ordered for weeks, and

was to be used at the home windmill, in case the wind failed to come along on time.

"Ain't you cookin' no more?" asked Arkansaw.

"Yeah, I'm cookin' and everythin'. Miss Priest done took the stage to Gateway this mornin', goin' to hire herself a lawyer; so I came in to haul this here in-gine home. How are yuh, Arkansaw?"

"Not so very good."

"What's ailin' yuh, feller?"

"Whiskyitis."

"Yea-a-ah? You been drinkin'?"

"Nope—jist about to start. How about takin' a drink with me?"

"Well, I'll take about the fill of a mule's ear with yuh. My danged rheumatiz has been a-botherin' me lately. If I git down, I can't git up."

"We called that laziness down in Arkansaw, Swan River."

"Call it what yuh like—it aches hell out of me. Teeth's bad, too."

"You been a-brushin' of 'em, Swan River?" asked Arkansaw.

"Is that good for 'em?"

"It shore ain't. I got me a girl a couple years ago, and she said I ort to brush m' teeth. Bein' in love, sorta, I gits me a bresh and some of that there tooth grease that tastes like a Sweet Willyum smells. Well, sir, inside of three months my teeth went all to hell. Along comes a handsome cowboy, and away went my girl. I couldn't neither love nor bite. C'mon."

"I'm jist havin' a drink or two with yuh," warned Swan River. "I'm busy as hell, Arkansaw."

"Don't stay on my account. I only asked yuh to have one drink. Anyway, you'll have to git home before dark, 'cause you can't see them two horses after sundown."

"My eyes is as good as yours, you dern razorback."

THEY went into the Yucca Saloon, where they both knew the bartender, a portly Norwegian named Slim Swensen. Slim was a good drink mixer, but too set in his ideas to be companionable.

The two men ordered their drinks and told Slim to join them.

"I take small beer," smiled the bartender.

"You'll take whisky," said Arkansaw. "This here saloon makes enough profit on regular drinks, without you addin' to it at two-bits for a small beer. That's one reason I hate the Swedes."

"I am a Norvegian," corrected Slim, as he poured himself a drink.

"They all come from the same place," said Swan River. "Well, here's hopin' the rope don't break when they hang yuh."

"The Norvegian does not come from same place as Svede," said Slim warmly.

"How can yuh tell any difference between 'em?" asked Arkansaw. "They all look alike and smell alike."

"What you mean—smell alike?"

"Raw alcohol and raw fish."

"Shove the bottle down thisaway," said Swan River. "Get in on it, Slim."

"I take small——"

"You take whisky," interrupted Swan River.

"All right, I take von more."

Then it was Slim's turn to treat, and Arkansaw poured three drinks, before Slim had a chance to take his small beer. After three big drinks of that high-proof stuff Slim's English became very broken, and he forgot all about small beers.

After three more, Swan River forgot all about that gas engine. He wanted to sing.

"Ay am goot seenger," stated Slim. "Ay can seeng to beat haal, but I only know Norvegian song."

"Sing 'em in English," suggested Arkansaw.

"By golly, das a goot idea, Horkansaw. Ay must t'ink of von."

"Yeah, and you'll be ready to sing in about a week," said Arkansaw. "Any time a Swede starts to think——"

"Horkansaw, Ay am not Svede man."

"Yo're a bug-eyed Bohunk," said Swan River. "Pass the bottle."

Swan River was getting bug-eyed himself.

"Let's shing," suggested Arkansaw. He downed a glass of liquor, lifted his long nose toward the ceiling, and wailed in a reedy tenor:

"'Oh, bury me-e-e-e-e not on the lone prairee-e-e-e-e-e,'
Those words came slo-o-o-ow and mournfull-ee-e-e-e-e-e
From the pallid lips of a youth that la-a-a-a-a-ay

On his dyin' co-o-o-o-ouch at the close of da-a-a-a-ay."

"Oh, do-o-o-o-on't seeng that!" wailed Swan River. "Arkansaw, yuh break my heart."

Swan River clung to the bar with both hands, tears streaming down his furrowed cheeks. Slim's underlip was quivering, eyes full of tears, as he strove to keep his composure.

"What the hell you cryin' about, Slim?" asked Arkansaw.

"Ay like das song," quavered Slim. "It make he homeseek."

"Thasso? I suppose they shoot 'em and bury 'em on the prairie in yore old home town."

"The Swedes shoot 'em," said Swan River sobbingly.

"Das Svede never warse man enough to kill Norvegian," declared Slim warmly. "Oll my folk was great fighter. My grandfather vars a fighter man. My great, great grandfather vars a Wiking."

"What was he?" queried Swan River.

"He vars a Wiking."

"Oh, yea-a-ah!" snorted Arkansaw. "A Viking."

"Sure—a Wiking. You know what iss a Wiking, Horkansaw?"

"I shore do. He was a Swede, before they quit wearin' horns and become Norwegians."

SLIM swallowed the supreme insult along with a glass of whisky. He was at a point where it was useless to try and explain things.

"I've seen them there Vikin' fellers in pictures," said Swan River owlishly. "Did they dehorn 'em, Slim, or jist breed 'em out of it?"

"Neither one, Swan River; they jist discovered how to turn 'em around and grow 'em inside. Look at Slim. Didja ever see a harder head in yore life?"

Slim felt foolishly of his head.

"If you hit him hard enough on the head, yuh can hear the horns rattle," said Arkansaw seriously.

"Thasso?" Swan River looked curiously at Slim's head.

"Oh, shore," assured Arkansaw. "That's where they got their original idea of that there death rattle—a Swede shakin' his horns."

"Ay don't t'ink so," said Slim, shaking his head.

"Hear it rattle!" said Arkansaw triumphantly. "I told yuh!"

"Das vars my teeth," retorted Slim. "Das upper set don' fit good."

"All right; let's have another drink," said Arkansaw.

Darkness comes swiftly after sundown in that part of Arizona. There is no twilight. It required the efforts of all three men to light the big lamp over the bar, because all three of them had to cling to the bar in order to stay upright themselves.

They sang a few songs. In fact they sang three songs at the same time, and one was in Norwegian. But they didn't mind. It was quiet in Palmville, and few came to annoy them. Arkansaw spoke about Judas Priest and Swan River wept copiously, assuring them that Judas Priest had been the greatest man that ever lived.

"But he gave Jack Lance half the JP," said Swan River tearfully.

"Cut 'm in-two, eh?" gulped Arkansaw.

"Tha's worsht of it," explained Swan River. "Can' cut 'm. Yuh shee," he said owlishly, "Jack Lance wants to wed Rita. Thasall right, but Rita don't wan' marry him. Yuh shee? Jack gits mad's hell, and shez if she don't marry him, he's goin' shell his half to Bull Hagar."

"No!" blurted Arkansaw.

"Yesh. We wash over to shee Steve Treadway 'bout it. Great boy, Steve. He'll help 'r, y'betcha. Shundown West, he'll help 'r."

"He'll help her, eh?" queried Arkansaw. "How?"

"How?"

"Howze goin' help 'r?"

Swan River scratched his head and lost his hat.

"The ques'n is, howze goin' help 'r?" repeated Arkansaw. "I deman' to know, Swan River. I'm offisher of law, and I deman' to know."

"He didn' shay."

"Gotta be a way," insisted Arkansaw.

"Cer'nly," agreed Swan River. "But he never shed."

"There's only one thing t' do," decided Arkansaw, "and that's for ush to go out and find out how he's goin' help 'r. You shee, Shwan River, we mus' know."

"Tha's a fact," agreed Swan River. "It's urgent."

"Urgent? Why, it's im—im-per-i-tive. Know what that means?"

"Ay vill go 'long," said Slim. "Das is job for goot men."

"Shore," agreed Arkansaw, "we'll take yuh, Slim."

"Oll right. But how ve go—valk?"

They looked foolishly at each other.

"Tha's the ques'n," nodded Swan River.

"Whaz a ques'n?" queried Arkansaw.

"Where are we goin'?"

"Ay am going sit down to think," announced Slim, and sat down on the floor behind the bar.

ARKANSAW leaned heavily on the bar, from behind which came the stentorian snoring of the thinking Slim. He had passed out of the picture.

"I 'member now," said Arkansaw. "We're goin' out to Steve's ranch to shee what he shed."

"Wash that it?" queried Swan River thickly. "Shed about what?"

"Well," decided Arkansaw, after a long period of thought, "we'll ask him. We'll go in yore wagon."

"Tha's right. I forgot that wagon. C'mon."

Swan River took the uncorked bar-bottle, which contained nearly a quart, and they went weaving out of the place, both men colliding with the side of the doorway on their way out, and wending their devious ways across the street to where the team was tied in front of the dark stage office.

Swan River gave Arkansaw the bottle of liquor.

"You get on the sheat and hol' 'm," ordered Swan River. "Thish is wil' team, y'betcha."

Arkansaw managed to get up in the seat, while Swan River essayed to unfasten the tie rope. It was too dark for Arkansaw to see very well, but he had a hazy impression that there was a third horse. Swan River was clawing around, saying, "Whoa, you buzzer-heads! Who-o-oa!

Sock! A flying heel collided with Swan River, and Swan River also faded out of the picture.

"Hurt yuh, Shwan River?" asked Arkansaw. No answer from Swan River; so Arkansaw took a drink, fell off the wagon and went pawing around in the dark.

"Horsh kicked yuh, huh?" he muttered, as his hands came in contact with a pair of booted feet. "Don' let that worry yuh. Be a man, Shwan River. Up an' at 'm, feller! No? Well, thasall right; I'll load yuh in wagon. Whoa, broncs! My goo'-ness, yo're awful heavy, feller! Don't sag thataway. Up yuh go-o-o-o!"

And Arkansaw deposited him over the endgate of the wagon and in among the parts of the gasoline engine. Then Arkansaw, after much hard labor, managed to regain the seat. He forgot to untie the horses, which surged back on his pull on the lines, and snapped the ropes.

The frightened horses whirled, cramping the wagon dangerously, and Arkansaw was thrown between the seat and the front end of the wagon, but retained his grip on the lines. The seat fell off, when they ran a front wheel over a corner of the wooden sidewalk, but Arkansaw got to his feet, and went out of town like Ben Hur driving a chariot.

ALL was serene at the S Bar T ranch. Sundown was sleeping in the ranch-house with Steve Treadway, when a terrific

crash caused him to jerk from under the blankets. He and Steve hit the floor at about the same time.

"Good Gosh, what was that?" exclaimed Steve, groping for a match.

Someone yelled from the bunkhouse, where they had heard the crash, and by the time Steve had a lamp lighted, three half-dressed cowboys were coming in the back door.

They found Arkansaw Pickert on the floor of the main room, and behind him was a smashed window, through which he had catapulted; and his injuries seemed to consist of a scratched nose. He goggled at the light and grinned widely.

"Hyah, boys," he said. "Man, we shore went shome, didn't we?"

"Well, what the devil happened?" gasped Steve.

"Hey!" snorted Chuckwalla. "There's a team and wagon jambed against the porch, Steve!"

The boys managed to unhitch the exhausted team, which were cut up a little.

"That's a JP outfit," said one of them.

"Shore," agreed Arkansaw drunkenly. "Shwan River's in the back. Horsh kicked 'm, but I brought him along. Ho-o-o—hum-m-m."

And Arkansaw proceeded to topple over and go to sleep on the floor.

"Of all the damn fools!" marveled Steve. "If Swan River's in the back, we better get him in here. He might be hurt bad."

The wind blew out the lamp, and while Steve went back in the house the others removed the inert body from the wagon.

"Gosh, he must have been kicked hard!" muttered Chuckwalla. "He's stiff!"

They carried him into the house, where Steve had lighted the lamp, and laid him on the floor.

"Great lovely dove!" exploded Steve, while the rest looked at each other and swore softly.

"That's Bugs Hinkey!" exclaimed Steve.

"And dead as a door-knob!" blurted Chuckwalla. "I told yuh he was stiff, didn't I?"

Steve and Sundown exchanged glances, and Sundown nodded. It was the man he had knocked down in San Francisco, the night he had rescued Rita Priest. Steve shook the sleeping Arkansaw, anxious to find out why he was hauling a dead man in a JP wagon; but Arkansaw had done his fadeout completely.

Somebody shore patted that poor devil on the dome," said Chuckwalla.

"I don't reckon he's been shot," said Steve. "Somebody busted his head. Chuckwalla, you and Joe saddle up and go to Gateway. Get the sheriff out here as quick as yuh can. Jimmy, you go to Palmville and see if yuh can find the missin' Swan River. I don't reckon you'll find any of the JP outfit in town at this time of night, but if yuh do, tell 'em their team and wagon are out here."

AFTER the cowboys had gone to dress and saddle, Steve and Sundown sat down to try and figure out what happened. Steve put a pillow under Arkansaw's head, threw a blanket over him, and let him sleep.

"This is shore a funny deal," mused Sundown. "What do yuh suppose Bugs Hinkey was doin' over here?"

"That's hard to tell," replied Steve. "Are yuh sure that's the same feller you knocked out in Frisco?"

"Same one, Steve. Does he work for Hagar?"

"No, he works for the 7UR outfit."

"Well, why would a 7UR cowboy be down there in Frisco, mixed up in a kidnappin' deal?"

Steve shook his head. "Search me, Sundown."

"That's an idea," smiled Sundown. "Only I'll search Mr. Hinkey."

The search of Hinkey's pockets revealed a few dollars in silver, a pocket-knife and a sealed envelope, dirty from handling, but blank.

"Had we better wait for the sheriff to open that?" asked Sundown.

"It's just like this," replied Steve wisely. "If it's opened, how would the sheriff know we opened it?"

Sundown laughed and opened it. Inside was a single sheet of paper, on which was printed in scrawled letters:

UNDERSTAND YOU QUIT DANCING. THERE WILL BE A DANCE HERE THE NIGHT OF AUGUST 10 AND THERE OUGHT TO BE FIFTY COUPLES AT USUAL PRICE. WE EXPECT YOU TO BE THERE.

B.

"Well, that don't mean much," said Steve. "It's just a notice that there will be a dance somewhere on August tenth. We don't even know who was to get that notice, and it's signed by 'B'."

"Bull Hagar?" suggested Sundown.

"He wouldn't be havin' anythin' to do with a dance."

"What's the name of the owner of the 7UR outfit, Steve?"

"His name's Reach—Buck Reach."

"That might be his initial. And Hinkey worked for him."

"It might be."

"And Hinkey came over here to deliver it. The question is; who was he goin' to deliver that note to."

"That don't mean anythin', Sundown."

"I suppose not. Listen to Arkansaw snore! He won't be able to tell us anythin' before mornin'—if then. Shall we put him on a bunk?"

"Let him sleep where he is," replied Steve. "We'll put a blanket over Bugs Hinkey's sad remains, and go back to bed."

CHAPTER VII

"HELL IS FULL OF MEN WHO DIDN'T SCARE!"

BACK in Palmville, thirty minutes after Arkansaw drove out of town, Swan River Pete crawled away from the edge of the sidewalk near the stage office, and managed to get on his feet. He had been kicked—and kicked plenty hard, but his recollection of it all was hazy. Some of the liquor had been driven from his brain, but he was by no means a sober man.

He made his way across to the saloon, where he found Al Stivers, the owner, behind the bar. Stivers had discovered Slim asleep on the floor behind the bar. He looked critically at Swan River, who was dirty and disheveled.

"I thought you drove your team out of town a half-hour ago," said Stivers. "I heard it leave, as I came here."

"Thasso?" queried Swan River, leaning against the bar.

"You drove a team in from the ranch, didn't yuh?" asked Stivers.

"What team was it?" asked Swan River blankly.

"Didn't you load an engine of some kind at the stage office late this afternoon?"

"Engine? Engine? Oh, yea-a-a-a-ah! Was that this afternoon? It was? Well, where is it now, I wonder?"

Swan River angled his way over to a chair, where he sank down heavily.

"You'll probably get fired for this, Swan River," said Stivers.

"Nossir," replied Swan River. "They can't fire me—I've got a lifetime job."

Swan River was fast asleep in a chair, when Jimmy Fultz arrived from the S Bar T, and was unable to give any sort of an account of what had happened.

"Slim Swensen is stewed to the gills, too," said Stivers. "I reckon he got drunk with Swan River and Arkansaw."

"It's a hell of a mixup, any old way yuh look at it," said Jimmy. "Arkansaw tried to drive the team through the ranch-house, and in the wagon was Bugs Hinkey, from the 7UR, dead as a door-knob, with his head busted. Arkansaw got throwed through a window, and went to sleep on the floor. He said Swan River was in the back of the wagon, but it wasn't Swan River at all."

"I've heard of Bugs Hinkey, but I never did see him," said Stivers.

"You ain't missed much," said Jimmy dryly.

BREAKFAST was over at the S Bar T, when the sheriff arrived. Arkansaw was cold sober, but stiff and sore, and hazy on details.

"We got drunk, I know that," he told Smalley. "There was me, Swan River and Slim, the Swede bartender. No, he ain't a Swede, he's a Norwegian."

"That don't get us anywhere, Arkansaw," complained the sheriff. "What we want to know is somethin' about this dead man."

"Same here," grinned Arkansaw. "He wasn't supposed to be with us."

"But who killed him and how'd he get in the wagon?"

Arkansaw held his head between his hands for a while, trying to remember more of the details. He lifted his head and looked around.

"Has anybody seen Swan River?" he asked.

"I seen him asleep in the Yucca Saloon last night," said Jimmy.

"I remember somethin'," said Arkansaw. "I was on the wagon seat, and Swan River was goin' to untie the team. I thought I seen three horses."

"You prob'ly did," said the sheriff dryly.

"And a horse kicked Swan River. Yeah, that was it—a horse kicked him. I got out and found Swan River."

"You found him?"

"Sure. The horse kicked him down. I remember I picked him up and put him in the wagon."

"You put Swan River in the wagon?"

"Right in over the endgate."

"Are yuh shore it was Swan River?"

"I couldn't see him, but I could feel him."

"Arkansaw, you picked up the wrong man."

"Well," said the lanky deputy, scowling painfully, "how'd I know I had to make a selection?"

Jack Lance and Ike Carver came riding in. They had been to Palmville, searching for Swan River and their freight outfit, and had been told what had happened at the S Bar T. Treadway was cool in his greeting to the foreman of the JP.

"We got some of the story in Palmville," said Lance. "Swan River don't know what happened. The old fool was too drunk to know."

Both Lance and Carver were able to identify Bugs Hinkey, but had no idea what he was doing in Yucca Valley.

"I'll send a message to Buck Reach from Gateway," said the sheriff. "I'll get a rig and take the body down there."

"I'll furnish yuh a rig, Smalley," offered Treadway.

LANCE and Carver put their wagon in shape to travel again, and went away with it.

"This darn country is goin' to have a bad reputation, if this sort of things keeps on," complained the sheriff. "The Lord only knows who killed Hinkey, nor why he was killed. I'll see if I can find out anythin' from Reach. He may know why Hinkey came over here."

"Is Reach a friend of Bull Hagar?" asked Sundown.

"Not hardly," grinned the sheriff. "Reach is a cattleman. What gave yuh that idea, Sundown?"

"Oh, I dunno, Smalley; I get funny ideas. What do yuh make of that letter yuh got off Hinkey?"

"Not a darn thing. It only tells about a dance, and it don't even say where it'll be."

"I'm not goin'," declared Arkansaw. "I allus git drunk at a dance, and I hate to get drunk."

"Filled with remorse, are yuh?" asked Chuckwalla.

"Somethin' damn sour," replied Arkansaw.

They took Hinkey's body down to Gateway, and the S Bar T went back to branding calves. Sundown seemed very thoughtful that morning and at noon Treadway asked him about it.

"I dunno, Steve," smiled Sundown.

"I've been tryin' to figure out why Hinkey was over here. I'm not much of a detective, I guess."

"I know I'm not," laughed Treadway. "Sundown, did you ever hear that the rustlin' didn't stop after you was sent to the penitentiary?"

"No, I didn't hear that."

"Well, I didn't hear it direct. Swan River got full of hooch one night in Gateway, and confided to me that someone was stealin' cows from the JP. He even told me that Priest had appealed to the Association for help."

"How long ago was that, Steve?"

"Only a few months ago."

"Mebbe Priest was dreamin' about another victim—like me. Steve, it makes me mad, when I think of that jury believin' that I altered the JP to a WAW connected brand. I admit it could be done. I'll betcha I can do it, brandin' through a wet cloth with a runnin' iron, and you'd never suspect it. But that frameup was a crude job; anybody could see that. They made it as bad as they could. It was just my bad luck that we both branded on the right shoulder."

"But what has altered brands got to do with Bugs Hinkey?"

"Not a thing, Steve; I just got to thinkin' about my own hard luck. Let's burn a little more hair on the dogies."

SWAN RIVER PETE was mad. In fact, he was so mad that his knuckles showed white from his grip on that old single-action forty-five Colt. He was leaning against the wall just outside the kitchen door of the JP ranch, a flour sack apron tied around his waist, sleeves rolled to his elbows, and a smear of flour across his nose.

Ten feet away from him stood Ike Carver, an undersized, buck-toothed cowboy, both hands held well above his beltline, as he faced the angry old cook. Carver licked his lips with the tip of his tongue, his eyes watching the unwavering muzzle of that gun.

"You ain't goin' no place, Ike," said Swan River evenly. "At least yuh ain't, until yuh apologize to Miss Priest. And if yuh don't apologize to her, yo're goin' where the woodbine twineth not because of the heat."

"Oh, well, hell!" snorted Ike softly. "All I said was——"

"I heard yuh. She said for you to keep off that sorrel horse. That's her horse, and you know it. And you told her to not be so damn fussy. Yo're goin' to say yo're sorry yuh said that. You fellers are workin' for her as much as yuh are for Jack Lance. Mebbe she can only fire half of yuh, but in that case I only have to feed half of yuh——"

"You tryin' to be funny, Swan River?" asked Carver.

Rita came to the doorway and looked sharply at Swan River. She saw the gun covering Ike Carver, but before she could question him, the old cook said, "Start yore little speech, Ike."

Ike licked his lips again, framed what he considered a fitting retort, but discarded it in favor of an apologetic tone, as he said:

"Miss Priest, I'm sorry I said what I did to yuh about yore horse. It won't happen again."

"Thank you, Ike," she replied. He turned on his heel, started for the stable, but turned back.

"Yo're goin' to be sorry, Swan River," he said coldly.

"I know it," nodded the old cook. "Once before I had a chance to kill a skunk, but I let him go; and I've been sorry ever since."

Carver turned quickly and walked away. Slowly the old cook shoved the gun inside the waistband of his overalls, and turned to the girl.

"I'm sorry you did that," she said. "It might make trouble for you."

"Let 'er make. Them saddle-slickers are goin' to be respectful to you, as long as I'm here—and I've got a lifetime job. They'll take advantage of a girl. Carver,

made me so dang mad, I almost let a bullet through his hide. But he's so danged iggerent that he wouldn't know he had a bullet through him for a couple days."

JACK LANCE came up from the stable, and they felt sure that Carver had told him, or perhaps he had seen the incident. Lance was serious, as he looked at Swan River. Then he turned to Rita.

"I don't like this idea of the cook threatenin' the men with a gun," he said. "That's bad business."

"Then you tell 'em to speak respectfully to Rita," said Swan River quickly. Lance turned and scowled at the cook.

"Who's runnin' this ranch?" he asked angrily.

"Runnin'? Did you say runnin', Jack? Well, you ain't."

"Go back in yore kitchen; I want to talk with Miss Priest."

"Stay here, Swan River," said Rita coldly. Lance laughed shortly.

"This is goin' to be fine, if we start quarrelin' among ourselves," he said. "Rita, you know very well that you don't know enough about this business to do anythin'. We can't operate under two bosses."

"When I am fully convinced that I am not able to run my part of the business, I shall hire somebody to run it for me, Jack."

"Yeah? You might hire Sundown West."

"That is not even polite sarcasm," replied Rita.

"Well, I didn't know; I saw you talkin' with him in Palmville yesterday."

"It was not a secret conference. I have a perfect right to talk with whom I wish."

"Oh, certainly. But don't it seem funny that we've had so many murders since he got out of the penitentiary?"

"You've been to two inquests," interrupted Swan River, "and heard the testimony. Yuh notice none of it pointed to Sundown West. Him and Steve Treadway was in bed together, when Arkansaw brought the dead body of Bugs Hinkey to the S Bar T."

"I heard the testimony," nodded Lance. "Very few killers ever get on the witness stand and incriminate themselves."

"Is there anything more you'd care to say to me?" asked Rita.

"Under the present circumstances—no. I may have something to say later. But I'm goin' to say plenty to Swan River, if he ever pulls a gun on one of my men again."

"Jist be careful it ain't you I pull it on," warned the old cook. "That old gun ain't got but a pound pull on the trigger, and when I git real mad, I sometimes git kinda jerky."

"You don't scare me at all," replied Jack.

"Hell's plumb full of fellers that didn't scare," retorted Swan River, and went back in the house with Rita."

That afternoon the sheriff came to the JP ranch, bearing a court order for Jack Lance to assume management of the JP ranch, until probation of the will and settlement of the estate. John Ames had been named executor of the estate, which had been nullified by his death, and the court had been obliged to act as excutor.

"But haven't I anything to say about who manages this ranch?" asked Rita indignantly.

"Well, ain't this satisfactory?" asked the sheriff.

"Not under present conditions, it isn't."

"Well, I dunno what can be done about it, Miss Priest."

Rita turned to Jack Lance.

"I suppose you went to see the judge about having yourself appointed, when you were down to the inquest."

Jack Lance smiled slowly. "Well, I told

him the ranch would need a man in charge, and he asked me who I would suggest."

"And you suggested yourself."

"Why get a stranger out here, Rita? I know all the work."

"I suppose there is nothing to be done about it."

"Well, it won't be long," said the sheriff. "I don't reckon it takes over a month."

"Long enough," said Rita.

"But," said the sheriff, "yuh must remember this: Jack will have to make a complete report to the court of everything he does."

WITHOUT any further comment Rita walked out of the room. Lance grinned at the sheriff, who failed to see anything funny in the situation. Fifteen minutes after the sheriff was gone, Swan River Pete came to Rita in the main room of the ranch-house.

"Well, I'm fired," he announced.

"Fired?" exclaimed Rita. "Who fired you?"

"Jack Lance. He said he wasn't goin' to have to account to the court for any dead cowboys I might have killed."

"But he can't fire you, Swan River."

"Yeah, he can, Rita; and he can keep me fired, until that will is all settled. That will gave me a job for life, but that job don't start until everythin' is settled."

Rita shook her pretty head wearily.

"I don't know what we're going to do. Who will cook the meals?"

"Bill Jordan."

"He can't cook."

"That's what I told Lance. He said, 'Neither can you.'"

"But you will stay here, Swan River."

"Not accordin' to the boss. He says for me to get off and stay off, until I've got a right to come back."

"All right for Mr. Lance," said Rita grimly. "I'll pay him back for all this. I've money of my own in the bank; so I'll pack up my stuff and move to Palmville until this is settled."

Lance came to the house, as Rita packed her things. He had no excuses to make for what he had done. He begged Rita to stay at the ranch, but she paid no attention to his entreaties.

"At that, I'm in luck," she said, as she closed a grip.

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"I might have married you."

"You'll marry me yet, Rita."

"Is that so?"

"Sure, it's so."

"Not as long as I'm in my right senses. You've showed what you are. Why didn't you exhibit some of your real self to Dad. He'd have thrown you out of the county."

"We understood each other," laughed Jack. "Your father had brains, my dear."

"Meaning that I haven't, I suppose."

"You have a woman's brains."

"Which you believe are vastly inferior to those of a man."

"When it comes to running a cattle ranch—you bet. It isn't any job for a woman. Calm down, Rita. Look at this in the right way. I'm doing this job for both of us."

"I suppose you fired Swan River on my account."

"That old pelican! Rita, he's dangerous."

"He's dangerously loyal to me. He would have laid down his life for Dad, and I believe he'd do the same thing for me."

"Well, I don't want him to be layin' down any lives around here. Are you goin' to stay in Palmville?"

"What difference does that make to you?"

"Not a thing; I merely asked. May I come in to see you once in a while?"

"There isn't anything to see me about."

Jack sighed and walked to the doorway.

"I guess I went at things in the wrong way," he said. "I love you more than I ever did, Rita. You won't believe that, of course, but it's true. I'm not givin' you up; and don't you forget that."

He closed the door softly and walked away.

Chapter VIII

STRANGERS IN THE VALLEY

THE Yucca Valley end of the Aztec Pass was a fifty-foot cleft through the rocky rim, which surrounded the upper part of the valley, and its sides towered a hundred feet above the trail floor. Almost against the foot of the rocky rim was the line fence of the S Bar T, and a small gate gave entrance to the trail.

This gate was nearly a mile from the Treadway ranch-house, and was not visible from there. Until Steve Treadway had made an agreement with the JP outfit, who wanted to patrol this end of the range and especially that end of the pass, he had kept this gate padlocked and the key hidden. But after that agreement he gave Jack Lance a key, and later discovered that whoever used that key did not bother to keep the gate locked.

But with the JP outfit on a more or less constant patrol, there was little use of keeping a locked gate. Sundown had noticed the open gate and mentioned it to Steve.

"There's plenty cattle sign along the fence and through the gate," said Sundown. "It would be easy for some to drift through the Pass and scatter out through the breaks."

"Well, I told Lance to never leave that gate open," replied Steve. "I didn't ask him to keep it locked, but I did specify that it was to be kept shut."

"I think I'll ride back a ways this afternoon and see if any have drifted," said Sundown.

MIDAFTERNOON found him far back among the breaks, riding sign carefully. He had found a dozen S Bar T cattle and had sent them down into the pass, heading toward the Valley. They needed water, and did not have sense enough to go back to the ranch.

The shadows were beginning to lengthen when Sundown turned back toward the trail, and he was riding down a narrow canyon when he saw two riders on the trail below him. They were traveling toward Yucca Valley, and passed within a hundred feet of him. Sundown did not know them, but he knew they did not belong in Yucca Valley.

After they had passed out of sight, he rode carefully down to the trail and followed them. It was evident that they were in no hurry, and Sundown was obliged to travel slowly. The sun was below the western rim when Sundown nearly ran into them. They had stopped a hundred yards from the Valley entrance, dismounted, and were sitting on their heels against the rocky wall, smoking.

Sundown dismounted, tied his horse, and climbed up on the side of a rocky pinnacle, where he could see the trail nearly to the entrance. Here he sprawled high above the trail, waiting to see what the two cowboys were going to do.

It was a long wait. Sundown had an idea they were waiting to meet someone, but as it grew darker and darker, he realized that they were waiting for darkness before entering Yucca Valley. He could barely see the dim figures of the two mounted men, as they passed out of his range of vision, and then he climbed down to his horse.

Fifteen minutes later he was sitting in the ranch-house, telling Steve about the two men.

"Did you send out that bunch of cows I found up near the gate?" asked Chuckwalla. "They was shore plenty dry. We've got to keep that gate shut."

"I don't like the sound of what you seen, Sundown," said Steve. "I don't like the idea of strange riders comin' through the pass. It might just be a couple waddies, shiftin' their range; but if it was, they'd drop in here and say howdy.."

"I'll tell yuh what let's do," suggested Sundown. "Send a couple of the boys to hide out and watch that gate, while me and you go down to Palmville and see if they showed up in town. I didn't get an awful good view of 'em, but it strikes me they're

a pair to look out for. If they wasn't, why did they wait for darkness?"

"Why watch the gate?" asked Steve.

"To see if they go back through the pass."

"How about stoppin' 'em and makin' 'em account for things?"

"No, I wouldn't do that, Steve. We can't put no deadwood on 'em now. If they're up to crooked work, we'll give 'em plenty rope."

"All right. Chuckwalla, you and Jimmy go out and dig in around the gate. Better take yore bed-rolls and make a night of it. And don't take no horses out there."

"Aw," grumbled Chuckwalla, "let Joe pack the beds on a horse and then come back home."

"All right, you lazy devils," laughed Steve.

SUNDOWN and Steve rode to Palmville, but there was no sign of the two strangers. They found Jack Lance and Ike Carver in the Yucca Saloon. Steve drew Jack aside and asked him if they were still watching the pass.

"Not so much lately," admitted Jack, "but we will, Steve. Things have been kinda upset. You know how it is."

"Yeah, I realize that, Jack. But, as a matter of fact, two strange riders came through the pass after dark tonight. We don't know where they were headin'. They waited until it was dark, before they came into the Valley."

"Is that so?" muttered Lance. "Who do yuh suppose they were, Steve?"

"No idea in the world, but I'd like to know. We thought mebbe they stopped here tonight, but no one seems to have seen any strangers."

"That's funny, Steve. The gate was unlocked, eh?"

"The gate was open. Mebbe we better keep it locked after this."

"Yeah, that's right. I wish I knew who it was. Did you see 'em?"

"West saw 'em. He was driftin' for strays in the breaks, when he saw these two men. He watched 'em set down and wait for darkness."

"He did, eh? Mebbe a couple fellers got in bad at Gateway, and came through the pass, dodgin' the sheriff."

"That might be the answer. But they'd have to go through Gateway."

"Yeah, that's true. But if the sheriff was lookin' for 'em around Moon City, they could cut through here and beat him to Gateway."

"I guess that's what happened, Jack. But keep yore eyes open, will yuh?"

"I sure will. Tomorrow I'll have a man or two ridin' that rim. If Bull Hagar is figurin' on anythin', we'll have to let him know we ain't asleep."

Sundown and Steve went back to the ranch, and in the morning the two gate guards came back with their blankets.

"Nobody went through that gate last night," declared Chuckwalla.

"Yo're sure of that, are yuh?" asked Steve.

"We ought to be—we locked the darned thing."

Steve exploded with his mouth full of coffee, and Jimmy Fultz got most of it in his eyes.

"Old Faithful done e-rupted," said Chuckwalla, doubling over the table.

"You fellers are shore dumb," declared Steve. "We didn't want yuh to stop 'em. All we wanted to know was that they went out of the Valley."

"That's all right," assured Jimmy. "We'd have heard 'em cut the fence. Me and Chuckwalla had that all figured. Chuckwalla slept the first half and I slept the last half."

"And both of yuh slept the other halves," said Steve.

"We didn't sleep—we jist dozed," grinned Chuckwalla.

"If you ever join the army, they'll shoot yuh for sleepin' on yore post," said Steve.

"If you ever hear of me wishin' to join the army, go ahead and shoot me," said Chuckwalla. "I hate war—and I've seen a lot of it."

"You never saw no war," stated Jimmy. "Don't lie, Chuck."

"Ain't I? And me married twice? I'm a war veteran, I am."

"You ought to know somethin' about love," said Sundown.

"Show me anybody who knows more about it and I'll show yuh a liar."

"I wouldn't even believe you," laughed Jimmy.

"I know yuh wouldn't. But you jist git married twice, lose both of 'em by the grace of good luck and the assistance of somebody else they wanted worse than they wanted you—and then you'll say, 'Chuckwalla, go ahead; you can't tell me anythin' about love that I don't know.'"

"All cases are not alike," smiled Sundown.

"Mine was."

"How'd that happen?" asked Steve.

"I married the same woman twice."

"Yo're like the drunk who went into the dance hall," laughed Steve. "They ordered him out, the first time. The next time they led him out, and the last time they throwed him out. Somebody asked him if he was goin' back in, and he said he'd come to the conclusion they didn't want him in there."

"Only I didn't go back for the third time," grinned Chuckwalla.

"You wasn't drunk," said Jimmy.

"No, I wasn't drunk; I was crazy."

IT WAS about four o'clock in the afternoon, when Tom Smalley and Arkansaw Pickert rode in at the ranch. Sundown and Chuckwalla were shoeing Sundown's horse, but quit to talk with the sheriff. Steve saw them and came down from the house.

"What's the good word, Tom?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know any," replied the sheriff. "Anythin' new around here, Steve?"

"Same old thing. Didja just come up from Gateway?"

The sheriff nodded, as he turned and began untying what seemed to be a crumpled sombrero. He cuffed it into shape and placed it on his saddlehorn.

"You must be expectin' a high wind," smiled Sundown. "Packin' an extra hat thataway."

"It does look like I was," grinned the sheriff. "I found it on the road."

Chuckwalla walked up and looked at it closely.

"I lost that m'self, Tom," he said seriously.

"You never had as good a hat as that one."

"It looks like a pretty good hat to be found along the road," said Sundown.

"It's a Stetson, and it never cost less than fifty dollars," said the sheriff soberly. "Yuh know," he shifted comfortably in his saddle, "a man rode into Gateway this mornin'. He'd been shot three times. No, the doctor says he ain't goin' to die. Lost a hell of a lot of blood. Couldn't tell us nothin'. Mebbe he didn't want to tell us anythin'. Anyway, he did'nt have no hat on when he rode in. We found it on the road, between here and Gateway. This is his hat."

The sheriff tossed it to Steve Treadway,

and the others stepped over to get a close look at it. The owner's name was inked on the sweatband. Steve read it and looked up at the sheriff.

"Buck Reach, eh?" he said. The sheriff nodded.

"The owner of the 7UR outfit north of Moon City," said Sundown.

"Didja know him, Sundown?" asked Smalley.

"Never seen him in my life," replied Sundown. "He got the old Seventy-Six outfit a few months before Yucca Valley got tired of seein' me around. I understand he registered a new brand as the 7UR."

"So Buck Reach was over in Yucca Valley, eh?" said Steve. "I wonder who shot him."

"I'm gettin' tired of wonderin' about shootin' scrapes," said the sheriff angrily. "We're havin' too damn many to suit me. It seems like every day we've got an inquest or a fresh murder."

"Was Buck Reach ridin' a black horse?" asked Sundown. The sheriff looked keenly at Sundown.

"How'd you know that?" he asked.

"A black horse with its left hind leg white almost up to the hock?"

"Yea-a-ah," said the sheriff softly. Sundown turned to Steve.

"One of them fellers had that color horse, Steve," he said. The owner of the S Bar T handed the hat back to the sheriff, and told him about the two men coming through Aztec Pass.

"And Steve kept me and Jimmy out there at the gate all night to see if them two men went back," said Chuckwalla.

"And they didn't go back, eh?" said the sheriff.

"Not through Aztec Pass, they didn't."

"Sundown, I've got somethin' I want to talk over with yuh," said the sheriff.

THEY moved down by the branding corral, where the sheriff dismounted, and they squatted on their heels beside the fence.

"Bull Hagar was in to see me yesterday," stated the sheriff, "and he sorta intimated that you was workin' for him over here. I ain't goin' to say a word to Steve about it. He likes yuh, Sundown. If Bull told the truth, I'd jist slip out of the Valley, if I was you."

Sundown picked up a stick and drew designs in the dirt for several moments. Finally he lifted his head and looked at Smalley.

"Did Bull Hagar tell you that he warned me not to leave Moon City, and that he tried to have two of his men dry-gulch me in Aztec Pass?"

"No, he didn't mention that. What happened?"

"I killed a feller named Finney and crippled another."

The sheriff looked at Sundown in amazement.

"The hell you did! Why, it was reported that Finney was throwed from a horse and had his neck busted."

"I suppose they had to prove some kind of an alibi."

"But why would he hint that you was workin' for him?"

"He probably wants to get me killed off, or run out of the country. He knows they won't stand for a sheep spy over here. I'll tell you the truth, and I've told Steve the same thing. I came to Moon City to work for Hagar. I came there with that feller Pelliser. My job was to come over here and make a deal with Steve for his outfit.

"But when I got to Moon City and had a talk with Bull Hagar, the job was all off. Hagar said he wasn't goin' to try to put sheep in Yucca Valley. And then he just the same as told me to not try and come over here. I bought a horse and saddle from a puncher, who had quit the 7UR outfit, and pulled out over the old trail. I've told yuh what happened on the trail."

Smalley nodded thoughtfully. "I can't quite figure Pelliser out, Sundown. He drops in to see me sometimes. I've heard that he came from a gang of bad boys down in Texas. He's been around Moon

City quite a while, and I suppose he's workin' for Hagar."

"No question about that part of it. Pelliser came to me in Frisco and made me a proposition to work for Hagar. Hagar paid my fare from Frisco, and wanted to pay it back to Frisco. I don't know where Pelliser got off the track about that job. Mebbe Hagar changed his mind, while Pelliser was away."

"Would you really have worked for a sheepman, Sundown?"

"For the job he wanted me to do—yes. I was to buy out Steve, and open Aztec Pass to the sheep. As far as Judas Priest was concerned, I wanted to see him sheeped out."

The sheriff nodded thoughtfully.

"Pelliser told me what happened in that Frisco hotel. I don't blame yuh for bein' mad. Didja know that Jack Lance got the court to appoint him manager of the JP, until that estate is settled?"

"I didn't know that."

"Miss Priest is stayin' at the hotel in Palmville, and so is old Swan River Pete."

"The devil they are! Why did Swan River leave the ranch?"

"He says that Jack Lance fired him."

"He did, eh? But Priest, in his will, gave Swan River a lifetime job."

"To take effect when the will is settled," smiled the sheriff, as he got to his feet. They walked back to the others.

"Why don't you and Arkansaw stay all night?" asked Steve.

"No," said Smalley seriously. "We've got to be at the office, all ready to ride out and pick up the next dead man."

"We're goin' to take a pack-horse with us after this," grinned Arkansaw. "Save lots of time."

As they rode away from the ranch, Sundown turned to Steve.

"What day of the month is this, Steve?" he asked.

"Why, lemme see—this is the twelfth day of August. Why?"

"Oh, I was just wonderin'," replied Sundown.

Chapter IX

"Snake Brains"

THESE were anxious days for Rita Priest, wondering what Jack Lance was doing with the JP ranch. There was nothing to do in Palmville, and the old hotel was like an oven all day. She had not seen Jack since she left the ranch, and naturally he had made no report to her. She had talked with the sheriff, who told her about Buck Reach.

Then came a letter, postmarked from Moon City, which read:

Miss Priest:

If a man named Sundown West should come to you with any sort of a proposition, purporting to come from me, have nothing to do with him, as he is no longer in my employ.

Bull Hagar

Rita showed it to Swan River, who whistled softly.

"So he *was* workin' for Bull Hagar, eh?" snorted Swan River. "And he's still out at Treadway's place. A dirty sheep spy!"

"Do you believe that?" asked Rita.

"Believe it? Why, you've got the proofs in yore hand.'"

"Why should I believe Bull Hagar?" she asked.

"Well, he ought to know if Sundown was workin' for him. He ain't sayin' nothin' ag'in Sundown, except that you ain't to pay no attention to Sundown, if he tries to make yuh a proposition."

"Go to the stable and get a rig," ordered Rita. "We're going out and have a talk with Steve Treadway and Sundown West."

"Yo're the doctor," sighed Swan River.

But they didn't have to go out to the ranch, because as Swan River left the hotel, Steve and Sundown rode into town. Swan River met them and said that Rita wanted an interview; so they rode over to the hotel.

Without any comment Rita handed Bull Hagar's letter to Sundown, who read it carefully and handed it to Steve.

"So Bull Hagar fired yuh, did he?" queried Swan River.

"That's what he says in the letter," replied Sundown.

Steve snorted indignantly, as he gave the letter to Rita.

"What's to be done about a thing like that, Sundown?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied Sundown, his blue eyes narrowing angrily. "It seems that they're bound to drive me out of Yucca Valley."

"Were you really working for Bull Hagar?" asked Rita.

"Would he admit it?" asked Swan River, before Sundown could reply.

"Why should he admit it?" snapped Steve angrily.

"That's all right," said Swan River. "I've heard that you was tryin' to make a deal with Bull Hagar yourself. That's why Judas Priest kept his men watchin' Aztec Pass and the Rim."

"Swan River, if you wasn't an old man, I'd cuff yore ears off."

"If I wasn't an old man—you couldn't do it, Treadway. By gosh, this girl is gettin' a dirty deal all the way around, and I'm the only one backin' her. I may be an old man, but I can still shoot."

Rita turned away and walked up the stairs. The three men watched her until she turned the corner.

"You know how I feel bout it," growled Swan River.

Sundown smiled at the old man. "I'll buy yuh a drink, Swan River."

"I ain't drinkin' with no damn shepherd!"

"Nobody asked yuh to drink with one," said Sundown. "C'mon, Steve."

They walked away from Swan River and drank together at the Yucca Saloon. Steve had some purchases to make, and on their way home Sundown said:

"I'm goin' over the Aztec Trail tonight, Steve."

"The hell you are!"

"I'm goin' to be in Moon City tomorrow mornin'."

"Don't be a fool, Sundown."

"I don't reckon I'll ever be anythin' else. But fool or no fool, that letter settled things for me. I'm goin' to find Bull Hagar."

"And get yourself shot loose from the earth, Sundown. To hell with Bull Hagar! I know that letter was a lie."

"Rita Priest don't know it."

STEVE TREADWAY looked at the grim lines of Sundown's face, as they rode along.

"Woman in the case, eh?" he said softly.

"Oh, I know I'm a damn fool, Steve. A paroled convict, suspected sheep spy, a low-down gunfighter. Why, every day my sins seem to pile higher and higher. But I ain't got a notch on my conscience, pardner. I've never done a thing I'm ashamed to speak about. I don't mean a thing to that girl, but somehow I want—no, I dunno just how to say it. I want her to know I was on the square; I reckon that's it."

"I understand," nodded Steve. "But if you go to Moon City, tryin' to get Bull Hagar to admit anythin', you'll be planted on the hill, just as sure as the Lord made little apples."

"Well, he ain't comin' over here to talk it over with me, Steve."

"That's true. Well," sighed Steve, after a long pause, "yo're of age. Mebbe I'd do the same, I dunno."

They rode in at the ranch and started to dismount at the stable, when two men suddenly stepped through the stable door and covered them with rifles.

"Stay on yore horses," ordered one of the men.

"Howdy, Gravelle," said Steve. "What's the idea of this?"

"No use askin' questions. Get down, now, and keep yore hands up. Sandy, take their guns. Don't make any fool breaks now."

Sandy got their guns, and while the one known as Gravelle drove the two men ahead of him, Sandy led the two horses. They stopped at the house, where Gravelle produced a pencil and some paper, which he handed to Steve.

"Write a note to Chuckwalla Sands," he ordered. "Tell him you'll be gone several days and for him to run the place."

"Ain't this a damn high-handed way of doin' things?" asked Steve.

"Don't be a fool—write."

There was no way out. Steve wrote the note, which Gravelle looked over carefully. He motioned Sandy to watch them, while he went into the house and left the note on the kitchen table. When he came back he went behind the stable, secured their horses and came back. Ordering Steve and Sundown to mount, they rode toward the gate to Aztec Pass.

"Where the hell are you takin' us?" asked Steve.

"Yo're on yore way to Moon City, Treadway," replied Gravelle.

Sundown West laughed, and Gravelle looked at him quickly.

"What's so damn funny about it, feller?"

"You goin' to all this trouble, when we was goin' to Moon City tonight, anyway."

"Like hell, you was!"

"I'll leave it to Steve Treadway."

"That's right," nodded Steve.

"What for?" queried Gravelle.

"We'll tell that to Bull Hagar."

"You'll get a good chance to tell him plenty."

"I expect to," replied Sundown.

"Yuh might have to tell him why yuh shot Buck Reach, and what became of Tex Archer."

"Did Buck Reach say we shot him?" asked Steve.

"Buck ain't able to talk."

"You poor fool, we never even seen Buck Reach."

"Yea-a-ah? How about West describin' that black horse to the sheriff? Oh, no, he didn't see him; he jist guessed it. And if Buck wasn't here, how comes it we find his hat down there in the weeds jist outside yore main gate?"

STEVE and Sundown looked quickly at each other.

"The sheriff must have lost that hat down there," said Steve.

"Blame it on the law," jeered Gravelle, as they drew up at the gate. Steve noticed that the padlock had been smashed.

"Oh, yeah, we opened it," laughed Gravelle. "And the next time you see this place if yo're lucky enough to ever see it—there'll be a lot of hoof tracks—jist a hell of a lot of 'em. But they won't be cow tracks, Treadway; and you can bet on that."

"So that's Hagar's scheme, eh? Well the cards ain't all been played yet, Gravelle."

"Yore cards have, feller."

"Not in this game, Gravelle; I've got the joker buried."

"Joker, eh? That's a *dead* card in a man's game. Yeah, this is Hagar's scheme. With you out of the way, there's nobody to stop him from puttin' sheep in Yucca Valley. Who'd sue him for trespass on yore place? In forty-eight hours we can put twenty thousand in there. Let the JP fence their land; we'll use the rest. Possession is nine ponts in the law, Treadway."

"You'll curse the day yuh went in there, Gravelle."

"Curse who? Yo're off the list. There's only the JP. You fool, don't yuh realize that Hagar's outfit is stronger than the JP?"

"I suppose they are. Have yuh heard that Jack Lance owns half of the JP now?"

Gravelle laughed shortly. "Yeah, we knew that," he said. "It won't be worth much, when we get through with him."

"What's the idea of takin' me over to Moon City?" asked Sundown.

"Plenty of reasons, West; and Bull will tell 'em to yuh."

"Oh, I was goin' over to see him anyway; so it's all right."

"Yeah, but you wasn't goin' unarmed, West. Whoa. Here's where we stop and tie you fellers. We can't take any chances at this stage of the game."

"Kinda looks as though we're dangerous characters," smiled Sundown, as Gravelle finished roping him tightly.

"We ain't forgot the things you've done," replied Gravelle. "Yuh see, Finney was my bunkie."

"I wouldn't brag about that, if I was you" said Sundown.

"I'm not braggin'; I'm jist tellin' yuh."

"How's my old friend Pelliser?"

"You'll prob'ly see him. Finished, Sandy?"

"Tied off," grunted Sandy, and they resumed their trip. Steve's horse had been tied to Sundown's saddlehorn, with enough slack for single-file traveling. Gravelle led Sundown's horse, while Sandy brought up the rear.

STEVE TREADWAY'S heart sank as he studied the situation. The note merely told Chuckwalla that he and Sundown would be away several days, and Chuckwalla would take it as a matter of course. Steve knew Bull Hagar well enough to know that he would stop at nothing. There would be no evidence that he and Sundown had ever come to Moon City.

Bull Hagar could kill both of them, destroy all evidence, and no one could ever prove a thing against him. Steve had no false hopes. Even after the sheep were flooding Yucca Valley, Steve could cause Hagar a lot of legal trouble; and Steve knew that Hagar would not waste time in deciding between the mere shooting of a man or a costly lawsuit.

Steve turned his head and looked back at Sundown, who was whistling through his teeth.

"You don't seem worried much," he said.

"Steve, I ain't got a thing to worry about."

"What about yore life?"

"Well, I've only got one of them."

Steve laughed shortly. "I never thought about that," he said.

"And mine ain't been so awful pleasant," added Sundown.

"You'd hate to lose it, wouldn't yuh?"

"Well," drawled Sundown whimsically, "it would be quite a loss to me, that's a fact, Steve. What do you think about it, Gravelle?"

"Yore life don't mean a damn thing to me, West."

"Well, don't take it then," retorted Sundown. "I can shore use it better than you can."

IT WAS a long, weary ride for the two captives, who were roped too tightly for comfort. It was sometime between midnight and morning, when they circled Moon City and drew up at a rambling old house. A half-dressed man came out with a lantern and helped with the captives, who were taken into the house.

They were placed in separate rooms and Gravelle inspected their bonds closely, before locking the door. Sundown sat down on a rickety old cot; he ached too badly to try and sleep. There was no question about them being neatly trapped. No one had seen them leave Yucca Valley and no one had seen them arrive at Moon City.

Judging from the tangle of the sunbeams through a dirty window, it was about nine o'clock in the morning, when Bull Hagar came to see Sundown West. The big sheepman was grim but triumphant.

"So yuh came back to Moon City, eh?" he chuckled. "Glad to see yuh, West."

"I thought yuh would be," replied Sundown. "What's on yore mind?"

"Cool customer, eh?"

"No use gettin' feverish is there?" retorted Sundown. "If you'd have yore man slack these ropes a little, Hagar——"

"Which I ain't goin' to do," declared Hagar. "When I get a man, I keep him."

"What's the idea of bringin' me over here?"

"Why? That's a hell of a question. What about Buck Reach and Tex Archer? What about you killin' Finney on the Aztec Trail? I reckon I should let yuh go right ahead and kill or cripple every man I've got."

"Is Buck Reach one of yore men?" asked Sundown. "I thought he was a cowman, Hagar."

"If you thought he was a cowman, why didja shoot him up thataway?"

"I never shot him."

"Don't lie about it. What didja do with Tex?"

"I don't even know him."

"The next thing I know, you'll say yuh didn't shoot Finney."

"I shot Finney," admitted Sundown. "It was him or me. You sent 'em in there to dry-gulch me, Hagar."

"They went in there to stop yuh."

"With a bullet, if necessary."

Hagar shrugged his big shoulders. "Well, that don't matter now."

"If yore hired thugs hadn't showed up last night, I was comin' over to see yuh, anyway," said Sundown.

"Yuh was, eh?"

"I was ready to start, when they got the drop on us."

Hagar looked quizzically at the blue-eyed cowboy.

"What was you comin' over here for, West?"

"I wanted to find out why you sent that damn lyin' letter to Miss Priest."

HAGAR leaned against the wall, looking at Sundown through narrow lidded eyes.

"What letter was that?" he asked curiously.

"The letter you wrote her, tellin' her to ignore any proposition I might make, because I wasn't workin' for you any longer."

"You don't happen to have that letter, do yuh, West?"

"No; the young lady still has it, I reckon."

Hagar laughed shortly. "So you are sweet on Judas Priest's daughter, eh? That's a good one."

"Why did you write that letter?"

"Just what was in that letter?"

Sundown laughed bitterly. "Can't even remember what yuh write, eh. Hagar, what's the meanin' of the word 'purporting'?"

"I dunno what yo're talkin' about."

"You don't know what it means, do yuh?"

"No."

"Can yuh spell it?"

"What the hell are you drivin' at, West?"

"You write yore own letters, don't yuh?"

"Any that I have to write—yes."

"I thought so. What are yuh goin' to do with me?"

Hagar studied Sundown for several moments.

"I ain't made up my mind yet. Yuh see, there's a law against kidnappin' in this state."

"Life sentence, ain't it?" asked Sundown.

"And you ain't never goin' to get a chance to testify against me," said Bull Hagar meaningly. "Jist think that over, West. I'll send in some grub for yuh."

Steve Treadway's interview with Bull Hagar was along the same lines as Sundown's, except that they talked more about sheep. Hagar assured Steve that it was only a matter of hours before a gray wave would spew into Yucca Valley from Aztec Pass. And he also assured Steve that he (Steve) would never have any worries about that part of it.

"You left a note for your men," he told Steve. "They won't think of lookin' for

you for a few days; and after that they can look and be damned."

"Yeah?" replied Steve. "And when the sheep come in there, everybody will know damn well you got rid of me and Sundown."

"Will they?" Hagar laughed at Steve. "You poor fool, I've got a deed all made out for your property."

"A deed?"

"Yes, a deed."

"You ain't got no signed deed, Hagar."

"Yeah, it's all signed; and I defy anybody to prove it ain't yore signature. I wrote you a letter six months ago, askin' you to set a price on yore place; and I got a reply from you. That's all I wanted—yore handwritin' and signature. And that deed is witnessed by Sundown West—W. A. West. When he signed his name at the sheriff's office, I had a copy stolen for my own use. I'll show the deed, and say that both of yuh pulled out, afraid to face the rest of the valley. Now, what do yuh think?"

"I think you've got fangs, instead of teeth, you bloated rattler."

"You bet I've got fangs! I've got brains, too."

"Snake brains, Hagar. I suppose you started this deal by murderin' Judas Priest in San Francisco."

"Well, anyway," laughed Hagar, "it fit into my plans."

"I suppose it did. But if you think that me or Sundown West had anythin' to do with the shootin' of Buck Reach, yo're crazy as hell."

"We'll pass that point."

"I suppose you had somebody murder John Ames, the lawyer."

"Nope. I had nothin' again Ames. My personal opinion is that Sundown West killed Ames."

"Yore personal opinion is all cock-eyed, Hagar."

"It don't matter who killed him," said Hagar, as he walked out and locked the door.

Chapter X

COYOTE BAIT

ARKANSAW PICKERT sat on the top-pole of a corral at the S Bar T, dangling his hat in his hand, as he talked with Chuckwalla Sands.

"They've been gone since yesterday," said Chuckwalla. "Steve left a note, and all he said was that they'd be gone several days. I reckon he must have meant him and Sundown, 'cause they're both gone."

"I reckon they can take care of themselves," smiled Arkansaw.

"Yeah, I s'pose they can. Another thing; that padlock on the trail gate has been all busted to hell."

"Somebody didn't wait to get the key," said the deputy.

"I guess they didn't."

Arkansaw yawned widely and put on his sombrero.

"I wish I knowed where we lost that hat," he said. "Tom tied it onto his saddle, but it was gone next time he looked, which was when we rode into Gateway. Somebody has prob'ly got a good hat."

"Has Reach done any talkin'?"

"Not a word. He's able to talk, too. Tom asked him about the feller who come through Aztec Pass with him that night, but he won't say a word. That is, he won't answer questions. He wants to be moved to Moon City; but the doctor won't let 'em."

"It's a queer deal, all the way around, if yuh study it, Chuckwalla. Somebody murders Judas Priest. Then out goes John Ames, taken out the same way. Next we has Bugs Hinkey on our hands, killed right in Palmville. And to cap it all off, Buck Reach rides into Gateway, all shot to pieces, and mebbe the man who came with him is layin' in the brush, jist a piece of coyote bait. I tell yuh, Chuckwalla, we've got some killers around this here country."

"That's what worries me about Steve and Sundown."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about them two. I seen Rita Priest in Gateway this

noon. Came down on the stage, I reckon."

"Alone?"

"She was alone, when I seen her. I reckon her and Lance has split up for good. He's runnin' the ranch, until the will is settled."

"I ain't got no use for the JP outfit, but I do feel sorry for that girl, Arkansaw. Her and old Swan River Pete are livin' at the hotel. Yuh got to hand it to that old rawhider—he's loyal."

"And what a capacity!" snorted Arkansaw, as he lifted his head to look at some loose horses coming toward the ranch. Behind them came two riders.

"That's Jimmy and Joe," said Chuckwalla. "We've got to haul some poles for a new corral, and they had to round up a team."

CHUCKWALLA opened a wide gate, and the two riders crowded the snorting horses into the corral. Jimmy Fultz dropped off his horse, flung the reins over a post and came bow-legging his way around to Arkansaw and Chuckwalla. Jimmy mopped his streaming face with his sleeve.

"Is anybody missin' around this country?" he asked.

"Missin'?" queried Arkansaw. "What do yuh mean, Jimmy?"

"Me and Joe found a dead man."

"A dead man! The hell yuh did! Where'd yuh find him?"

"About a mile and a half from Palmville, and a quarter mile off the road to Gateway. Geeminy cripes, the coyotes has been at him, and he's a mess! Down in the bottom of a washout. A horse tried to break back on me, and I had to ride down this here washout to get up the other bank—and I s'prised a dozen buzzards. And did I git out of there?"

Jimmy was panting heavily. Joe came up and leaned against the fence.

"I stuck a stick in the bank and hung a red handkerchief onto it," he said. "You can find it easy, Arkansaw; don't ask me to go back."

"Could yuh see his face?" asked the deputy.

"No," replied Jimmy softly. "He ain't got none."

Joe swore feelingly and hammered his spur against the fence.

"Say!" blurted Chuckwalla. "I'll betcha he's the feller who was with Buck Reach. Sundown seen two of 'em, and one was Buck."

"I'll betcha," nodded Arkansaw. "Well, I've got to go find him, buzzards or no buzzards. Which one of you buckaroos is goin' to lead me to it?"

Arkansaw produced a silver dollar.

"Call it, Jimmy."

"Heads."

Arkansaw spun the dollar in the air, and they all looked it over on the ground.

"I have all kinda luck, and it's all bad," sighed Jimmy. "Git on yore horse, Officer."

"Bring back my handkerchief," said Joe.

"That rag is in some buzzard's craw by this time," replied Jimmy.

"It's pure silk and it's got my initials onto it," warned Joe.

"Yeah; and I think it was altered from a J. F. to a J. P., if yuh ask me. See yuh later, *Amigos.*"

"No sign of Steve or Sundown?" asked Joe, as the other two rode away.

CHUCKWALLA shook his head. "Steve said in his note that they'd be away for several days. Arkansaw says they never showed up in Gateway. Anyway he never seen 'em. They must have gone over to Moon City."

"But why go to Moon City?" asked Joe.

"I don't know. Hell, I don't reckon there's any use worryin' about 'em; but if they've gone over to Moon City, why didn't he say so?"

"That's the way I feel about it. And I don't like the idea of that smashed padlock."

"Well," sighed Chuckwalla, "I dunno anythin' we can do, except to wait a while."

"And after that?" suggested Joe.

"I dunno what we'll do, Joe. Few days! That ain't like Steve. Where would they go for a few days; and why was they in such a hurry that they couldn't wait to tell us what it was all about?"

"Are yuh shore that was Steve's writin'?"

"Yeah, it was Steve's writin'. Let's look at it again."

They walked up to the house and Chuckwalla found the note between the leaves of a book, where he had placed it.

"It's his writin'," agreed Joe.

"Wrote it with a 'delible pencil," he said.

"A what?"

"One of them 'delible pencils. Yuh can't rub it out like yuh can the lead ones."

"Huh!" grunted Chuckwalla, "have we got a pencil like that, Joe?"

"I never seen none around here. What kind of a pencil does Steve use?"

"One of them flat kind like carpenters use."

"Them ain't 'delible pencils, Chuckwalla. Where the hell did Steve git one to write this with?"

"Mebbe Sundown had one."

"That's right—mebbe he did."

The two cowboys looked at each other for several moments.

"What are you thinkin' about, Joe?" asked Chuckwalla.

"Nothin'. It jist kinda struck me that mebbe somebody——"

"Made 'em go somewhere?" finished Chuckwalla.

"Well, it don't sound reasonable," admitted Joe.

"No, it don't. And it don't sound reasonable that Steve and Sundown would pull out for a few days, and jist leave a note for us. And also, that same day the lock on the gate is smashed."

"Let's put on some beans," suggested Joe. "Us settin' around here, detectin' in our own minds! I'm hungry."

"I'm shore goin' to give Steve hell when he comes back; worryin' us thisaway."

"We'll shore tell him a-plenty," agreed Joe, and they went to the kitchen.

IT WAS two hours later when Jimmy came back to the ranch. He said that Arkansaw had gone to notify the sheriff and coroner.

"Can yuh imagine the crust of Arkansaw?" asked Jimmy. "He wanted me to stay with the body until they got back."

"Wanted yuh to keep the buzzards away, I suppose," said Joe.

"Well, they can't do it much more damage."

"Did Arkansaw have any idea who the feller was?"

"No. There may be somethin' in the pockets."

"Was he shot?" asked Joe.

"*Quien sabe?* It'll take a doctor to find that out. We went around through Palmville and seen some of the JP outfit. I told Lance about the busted padlock on the gate. He said none of his men busted it. We didn't tell 'em anythin' about the dead man; Arkansaw said to keep it quiet."

"It's so unusual to have dead men around," said Chuckwalla sarcastically.

CHAPTER XI

PARDNERS

TWO nights and days had passed since Sundown and Steve had been prisoners at the house in Moon City, seeing no one, except Gravelle, who brought them food and water. Neither knew what had happened to the other. Gravelle refused to supply any information whatever.

He was kind enough to untie their hands at eating time, but was careful to tie them securely again. Sundown had tried in every way to loosen his bonds. There was not a thing in the room that would assist him in any way. He was unable to remove his clothes at night, but even with his hands

tied, he was able to roll a cigarette. He thought of trying to burn the ropes from around his ankle, but it would require lots of time and innumerable matches.

He asked Gravelle about the sheep, but Gravelle only laughed and told him not to worry about that. It was nearly time for Gravelle to bring the noon meal, when Sundown made a discovery. The rope around his ankles had stretched a little, and Sundown suddenly discovered that he could pull one foot out of a boot.

It was but the work of a few moments to free his feet. But what to do next? His wrists were bound together. He started to try and replace the boots again and wait for more time to plan, but changed his mind, when a sudden scheme unfolded.

He placed the empty boots half under the blanket of his cot, bunched the dirty old pillow under the blanket, and walked over to the door, studying the effect. At a glance it seemed to be a man asleep under the blanket, with his booted feet half-out.

He heard footsteps outside the door, and a man's voice calling softly.

"Whatcha want?" asked Gravelle's voice, and Sundown realized that Gravelle was at the door, bearing food.

"Where's Bull?" asked a voice.

"Him and the boys pulled out a little while ago. Bull was down to Gateway and had a talk with Reach."

"And they're goin' to Yucca Valley, are they?"

"Yo're damn right—and they'll raise plenty hell over there. Bull knows somethin' now."

The other voice came closer, and the man spoke softly.

"Listen, Gravelle; that daughter of old Judas Priest is out in the main room."

"No!"

"Yes. She says she wants to see Bull Hagar."

"The hell she does! Well, can yuh imagine that? What does she want of Bull?"

"I done asked her; and she says her business is with Mr. Hagar. What'll I tell her?"

It was several moments, before Gravelle said, "We'll have some fun with her, Pete. I don't believe she ever seen Bull Hagar in her life. Go back and talk to her, while I feed the wild animals, and then I'll come in and be Bull Hagar."

"She's a damn pretty girl, Gravelle."

"Good! I like 'em pretty. Find out if she's wise to the sheep goin' into the Valley. No, you better leave that to me; you'd ball up everythin'."

"All right," laughed Pete.

Gravelle fumbled with the key, while Sundown crouched back, where the open door would cover him. He heard a door close behind Pete, and a moment later the lock turned and Gravelle stepped into the room, carrying a loaded tin plate. He was looking toward the bed, as he kicked the door shut with his heel, and at the same moment a pair of tied wrists flashed down past his face, locking across his throat, while a knee caught him in the small of the back, nearly breaking him in two.

LUCKILY the plate fell upside down on the floor, the food preventing any clatter. Gravelle choked, grasped wildly at the wrists, unable to utter a sound. Those steel muscled arms seemed to be drawing back, like the coil of a constrictor, and the knee in his back shoved ahead inch after inch. Things were going black for Gravelle. Suddenly he sagged at the knees, and Sundown let him slide to the floor.

Gravelle was not dead, but he was barely conscious. Sundown got his gun, and while Gravelle lay on the floor, trying to pump air into his tortured lungs, Sundown pulled on his boots. He could see that Gravelle was recovering fast.

Sundown grinned at him, as Gravelle wheezed asthmatically.

"You've got a knife in yore pocket, Gravelle," said Sundown softly. "Get it out and cut my wrists loose."

Gravelle understood. He fumbled like a drunken man, but got the knife. He was

sitting on the floor, while Sundown, holding the muzzle of the gun against him, squatted in front.

"Saw 'em, partner," ordered Sundown. "One fool move, and you'll go to glory on the end of a hot bullet."

But Gravelle had no fight left. He wasn't even able to get off the floor, and Sundown roped him where he lay. The key was in the door; so Sundown stepped into the narrow hall, locked the door and made a rough guess as to where the main room was located.

With the cocked gun in his hand, he stepped in quickly and shut the door.

Rita Priest was standing near the middle of the room, while the man called Pete was facing her, his back to Sundown. Rita's face was flushed, but it faded quickly at sight of Sundown.

"Bull," said Pete, without looking around, "this young lady says she wants to have a talk with you about a letter yuh wrote and——"

He turned and spoke, half laughing, until he saw Sundown. His hand flashed to his holster, but the gun in Sundown's hand was covering him, and he could read the expression on Sundown's face.

"Go ahead," said Sundown softly. The man's hand drew away and he folded his arms.

"What are you doing here?" asked Rita chokingly.

Sundown came slowly over to Pete and took his gun.

"Unbuckle yore belt and let it fall," ordered Sundown. "I may need more shells than I've got in two guns."

The man obeyed, and backed away, while Sundown secured the belt and buckled it around his own waist.

"So you were one of Hagar's men," said Rita.

Sundown ignored the question, as he said to Pete, "So Bull Hagar and his gang have gone to Yucca Valley, eh?"

"That's what Gravelle said," replied Pete.

"Where are the sheep??"

"So damn far that you can't stop 'em."

"What does he mean?" asked Rita anxiously. "Are the sheep——"

She hesitated. Sundown smiled grimly, as he said, "Yes, they're headin' for Yucca Valley. Mebbe Jack Lance and his men can stop 'em."

"Jack Lance!" snorted Pete. "He won't stop no sheep."

"I thought not. Where's Steve Treadway, Pete?"

"None of yore business, West."

"Lead me to him. You'll either do that, or I'll drill yuh full of lead and find him myself."

Pete shrugged his shoulders.

"I reckon yuh would, at that. Hagar said you was a damn sight more dangerous than the rest. All right, I'll show yuh where Treadway is."

HE FLUNG open a door to a sort of storeroom, and Steve Treadway, crouched on a pile of tarpaulins, lifted a haggard face.

"Cut the ropes off him," ordered Sundown. Steve blinked foolishly as Pete slashed away the ropes. He was barely able to walk, but managed to stumble out to them.

"Wh-what happened?" he wanted to know.

"I outsmarted Gravelle," replied Sundown, keeping an eye on Pete. "Hagar and his gang have gone to Yucca Valley, Steve; and the sheep are almost in over Aztec Trail."

"My gosh, is that true, Sundown?"

"Ask this jigger; that's what he told me."

"No joke," replied Pete. "Nothin' on earth can stop 'em now. Yuh might jist as well call it a deal, Treadway."

Steve groaned bitterly, as he looked at Rita.

"What are you doin' here?" he asked.

"Never mind that now," said Sundown. "We've got to do something."

Somewhere a voice called. Pete darted aside, bumped Steve against Sundown,

jostling both of them heavily, and went, like a frightened rabbit, around to the door where Sundown had entered the main room. Sundown sprang after him, but a door slammed in his face, and he heard Pete yelling, "Look out! It's a trap! They're loose, Andy! Look out!"

Pete was outside, yelling his warning. Sundown ran back and gave Pete's gun to Steve. They all went out the front door. Pete was running toward Moon River. Sundown ran around the corner. Behind the old house was a stable and some corrals.

A man was trying to open the corral gate, and several horses were milling along the fence. Sundown yelled at him and sent a bullet smashing into the gate-post above his head. The man gave up trying to open the gate and went running along the fence, dodging like a rabbit.

"Tried to let the remuda get away," called Sundown. "C'mon, we'll get us some rollin' stock."

The man was still running, circling toward the town, looking back at them, as they hurried to the stable. There were no saddles in sight, but Sundown was sure there must be some. A built-in room, padlocked, might contain some. Sundown found an old pick, and with it he quickly smashed the lock. As he flung the door open, he drew his gun and stepped back a pace.

"What are you doin' here?" he asked.

Nick Pelliser stepped out and looked at them.

"Put up your gun, West," he said huskily. "I've been a prisoner in this place for over a week. What happened? Where's Bull Hagar?"

"Wait a minute, Pelliser," warned Sundown. "You were a Hagar man when I knew yuh. No monkey business—now. We ain't got time."

"I'm a cattle detective," said Pelliser. "Association man. Bull found it out. Now, what's going on? I knew they had you and Treadway; they told me."

"All right," grunted Sundown, lowering his gun. "Here's plenty saddles. Grab one, Pelliser; I'll take one for the girl."

"Will she be able to ride with us?" wondered Steve. "It'll be hell, if they head us."

"She can't stay here, nor in Moon City."

"I'll go with you," said Rita bravely.

"Good girl!" applauded Sundown. "C'mon."

IT WAS but a few minutes' work for experienced men to catch and saddle four horses. Sundown selected a fast-looking roan for Rita, but mounted and drew its head tightly against his knee, until Steve helped her into the saddle. He was not going to take chances on her getting a bad horse.

But the animal was apparently well broken, and he slipped off the lead-rope. Pelliser ran to the house and came back, carrying two rifles, another six-shooter and several boxes of ammunition.

"I knew where they kept the extra guns," he panted, handing a rifle to Steve and one to Sundown.

"Do yuh reckon Pete stirred things up in town?" asked Steve.

"Unless I'm mistaken, Pete grabbed a horse down there and he's headin' in over Aztec Trail to tell Hagar we got loose," replied Sundown.

"Which way do we go?" asked Pelliser.

"Circle the east side," said Sundown. "I know where to cut over to the trail. Shake 'em up; we've got to ride fast. If Pete beats us to Hagar, we'll be trapped sure."

Rita could ride, for which the men were thankful; and she had the nerve to go along. As they crossed the road, which led from Moon City to Gateway, they drew up sharply, and Sundown turned to her.

"Rita, there's a safe road to Gateway," he said. "They won't look for us to go down there. You can make it before dark; and the trail we're takin' is jist like playin' with rattlesnakes."

She looked at him keenly and shook her head.

"You haven't any interests in Yucca Valley," she said. "And you have no cause to love the place. My interests are all there, and if you are willing to ride into danger to help us, is there any reason why I should take the safe road?"

"But we're men," said Sundown.

"That's why I want to ride with you."

"All right, pardner; let's go."

There was no difficulty in finding the Aztec Trail this time. Hundreds of sheep had left a dusty strip, and Steve Treadway cursed softly when he saw it. Here and there were stragglers, which had dropped out, too weak to stand the pace, and the urge of speed was too great for the herders to stop and take care of the weak ones.

Once in the trail there was no chance for a sheep to get far out of the crooked way. But they could make little speed. The chutelike canyons forced them to travel slowly.

PETE ORDWAY had helped himself to a horse at a hitch-rack; one of the 7UR horses, but before he had gone far he cursed bitterly. The animal had been ridden hard that same day, and was stumbling with weariness before they had gone three miles from Moon City.

Pete had yelled a warning to the man at the stable to turn the remuda loose, but he had no assurance that this had been done. If it had, Pete felt safe; but if it had not been done, and those Yucca Valley cowmen should secure mounts—well, there were hiding places along that trail, where he could save his own hide. The bad feature was that he could not watch his back trail.

Sheep blocked him at a narrow canyon, and Pete cursed impotently. A half-breed herder laughed at Pete's efforts to try and force his weary mount through the closely packed sheep.

"*No buena,*" said the herder. "Too *mucho carnero.*"

"Damn the sheep!" snorted Pete. "I'm in a hurry."

He sat there, fuming over the delay, watching the snail-like sheep drifting like a sluggish, gray flood.

"*Cuatro caballeros,*" said the herder. Pete whirled quickly. Four riders were trotting down the narrow trail toward him.

With a withering curse Pete drove the spurs into his horse and the animal lurched into a bucking gallop straight toward the sheep. The spang of a rifle shot caused the half-breed to drop quickly behind a bush. Pete's horse went headlong to the ground, throwing Pete into the thick of the herd. Sheep went down under the impact of his body, and he came up with a sheep on his back, only to go down again, with sheep leaping over him, like waves over a rock in a rapids.

But Pete was tough and he got through that narrow canyon, minus much of his skin and nearly all his clothes. The herder eyed the three men and the girl, but said nothing. It wasn't his battle. They spurred on behind the last of the sheep. But Pete had crawled into a rocky crevice, where he made himself as small as possible, thankful that the bullet had hit the horse, instead of him.

That particular bunch of sheep spread enough to let the riders through, but they knew there were more ahead.

"Well, that puts Pete out of the race," laughed Pelliser.

"And relieves my mind," added Steve. "If we can only get into the Valley before too many sheep get in; I can stop 'em."

"If we only can," said Sundown. "But I'm afraid Hagar will guard against anybody gettin' in or out. This is his one big move, and he won't hesitate to kill anybody who tries to stop him. How come you threw in with Hagar, Pelliser?"

"I was sent in here on a complaint by Judas Priest," said Pelliser. "Yucca Valley would have been no place for me to work; so I went to Moon City, got in with Hagar, and tried to work from that end. But Hagar never trusted me. He never trusted anybody. My name isn't Pelliser—it's Rose—Nick Rose. I knew a man in Texas by the name of Pelliser. He was

a tough boy, and they say I look like him; so I took his name. Hagar remembered the name and Pelliser's reputation, but still he didn't trust me. I think I could have eventually won his confidence, but this fellow we just handed over to the sheep —Pete Ordway—came up from Texas a week ago to work for the 7UR outfit; and he was a pal of Nick Pelliser."

"Man, what a finish that was for you!" snorted Steve.

"Wasn't it? They told me all about capturing you boys."

"Why did you try to get me to work for Hagar?" asked Sundodwn.

"For the simple reason that I saw a chance to work with you. I was over here to try and find out who was stealing JP cattle. You had been sent to the penitentiary for the same thing. I knew all about your trial and conviction, and it looked phoney to me. If your troubles were connected in any way with the rustling that took place after you left here, I thought maybe we might work together."

"I see the idea," nodded Sundown. "But what have yuh found out?"

"Not much. I know that Bull Hagar owns the 7UR outfit."

"I know more than that," smiled Sundown. "I figured out a lot of things, while I was tied up like a mummy."

"Did you find out enough to prove yourself innocent?" asked Rita.

"Not yet. Why did you come to see Bull Hagar, Miss Priest?"

"I came to ask him if he wrote that letter."

"Yuh did? You came all that distance to ask that question of yore worse enemy? But why? What difference did it make whether he wrote it or not?"

"I didn't want to believe he wrote it."

"Neither did I," smiled Sundown. "And he didn't; I asked him."

"Oh, I'm glad, Mr. West."

"My name's Sundown, pardner," smiled the blue-eyed cowboy.

"Sheep ahead!" grunted Steve. "Jist as far as yuh can see!"

SUNDOWN glanced toward the west. "Yeah, and I'll bet we'll have to make a dry camp among 'em," he said. "They'll be beddin' down on the trail, and these horses would have to have wings to ever make any progress."

"I don't like the idea of campin' on the trail," objected Steve. "Too much chance for one of these herders to work his way to the Pass and tell Hagar."

"I know a place," said Sundown. "It's above the trail, but I know we can take the horses. It's an old cliff dwellin'. We can make it before dark, and even if Hagar is warned, he'd never find us."

"Lead the way," said Steve. "We can't do a thing until mornin'."

Sundown found the place and they managed to lead the horses over a difficult trail to the old cliff dwelling, where they had a good view of much of the country. There was no camp to be made, no food nor water. But no one complained, Rita least of all. She and Sundown leaned over an ancient parapet and watched the changing lights of sundown. Rita told of the trouble she had with Jack Lance over the ranch.

"Where was Jack Lance the day John Ames was killed?" asked Sundown.

"Jack Lance and Ike Carver were in Gateway. Ike came back early, but Jack stayed there to wait for the minister."

"And John Ames was comin' to see you that day, wasn't he, Rita?"

"Yes."

"Later they opened his safe and found the will?"

"Yes, it was opened on a court order, Sundown."

"Rita, I wanted to ask yuh another question. When did yore father find out that you wasn't goin' to marry Jack Lance?"

"That day in the Palace Hotel—after the trouble. You see, we were going to stay several days longer, but after that Dad said we would go right home."

"Was Jack Lance comin' home with you?"

"No, he wasn't; he wanted to stay a while longer."

"I'll tell yuh somethin', Rita; the man who was found dead in Swan River's wagon at the S Bar T that night was the same man I knocked out in the cabin, the night I found you."

"The man they called Bugs Hinkey?"

"A cowpuncher for the 7UR."

"Why, Sundown, I don't understand that."

"It is sort of a cloudy thing. But I'm beginnin' to piece things together. Two men came through Aztec Pass one night, and one of 'em rode a black horse with a white hind leg. That man was Buck Reach, supposed to be owner of the 7UR. I dunno what became of the other man, but Buck Reach rode to Gateway, all shot to pieces.

"Now this Bugs Hinkey had a note in his pocket. It wasn't addressed to anybody, and it was merely signed with an initial 'B.' It said there was to be a dance and that the party it was meant for was supposed to be there. They were expectin' fifty couple, and there would be the regular price. It sounded innocent enough, but I've got a hunch that it wasn't."

"What on earth did it mean, Sundown?"

"I'll let yuh know, as soon as I find out for sure."

RITA sighed deeply and looked out across the broken canyons, misty in the fading light.

"The JP ranch is a thing of the past, Sundown," she said. "With thousands of sheep in there, we're ruined. I'll sell my half of the stock—it's all I can do."

"We ain't whipped yet, Rita."

"We?"

"I'm sorry," replied Sundown softly. "I forgot. Yuh see, I once had a little ranch over there, and it's—well, ever' once in a while I forget that I'm an outsider."

"But still fighting for Yucca Valley."

"Yes, I am. I tell yuh, I'd fight a buzzsaw for Steve. He stuck to me, Rita. Even when I came back—he took me in. He's white, Steve is. We picked up our friendship right where it was broken off."

"And in helping Steve Treadway, you are helping me."

"I want to do that, Rita. I figure you the same way I figure Steve."

"Oh, I'm glad," she said softly. "It is good to know that."

"And if our luck lasts," said Sundown, "we'll come out of it all right. I ain't askin' the Lord to take sides with us against the sheep, but because we're on the right side."

"Do you believe that the Lord takes sides, Sundown?"

"Well, I reckon so. Don't the Bible say, 'God is good.' And bein' good, He can't side in with people who are wrong. Anyway, that's my way of lookin' at it. Of course folks might say that God couldn't be on my side, 'cause a jury of twelve honest men said I was a cow thief and a gun-fighter and all that. But I never stole no cows, Rita, and if there's a Supreme Bein' who looks after us and knows what we know, He knows I never stole them cows."

"I know you didn't, Sundown. You couldn't steal cows."

"Well," laughed Sundown, "I wouldn't go so far as to say that. We better find a warm corner and a couple horse blankets for yore bed, before it gets too dark. There's Steve and Rose over there, tellin' each other how smart they was to escape from Moon City."

"And you were really the smart one."

"No, I'm not," laughed Sundown. "If I'd been real smart, I'd have pulled my foot out of that boot two days ago."

Chapter XII

Steve's Last Ace

CHUCKAWALLA SANDS was having a terrible nightmare. He dreamed that he was in the middle of the narrow Aztec Pass, blocked from escape in either direction by two huge rams, and every time he tried to run past one of them the

animal would butt him back to the other ram, which in turn would butt him back to the center. Sort of a glorified soccer game, with both rams scoring at will.

An extra hard jolt suddenly awoke Chuckwalla and he sat up in bed, trying to fend the rams away with both hands.

"Whoa, sheep!" he snorted, and gazed wildly around.

On either side of him were Jimmy Fultz and Joe Parker, shaking him; and a few feet away were two masked and armed men. Chuckwalla looked in amazement at Jimmy and Joe, who didn't seem to be getting much enjoyment out of things.

"You wouldn't wake up," complained Jimmy. Jimmy and Joe had been sleeping in the bunkhouse, while Chuckwalla used Steve's bed in the house.

Chuckwalla looked foolishly at the armed men, whose faces were concealed by black cloth.

"What the hell's goin' on around here?" asked Chuckwalla. "Who started this masquerade, anyway?"

"Never mind who started it," replied one of the men. "All you've got to do is keep on bein' a spectator."

"Yeah? Well, who the billy hell are you, feller?"

"Don't get smart," retorted the masked one. "You'll know plenty soon enough.."

"Sheep!" snorted Jimmy. "They're comin' through the pass. Listen."

Sheep were blatting softly, as they eddied about the ranch-house. Chuckawalla swore feelingly.

"So that's yore holdup, eh?" he said. "Stickin' us up at the point of a gun, while yore damn woollies come in."

"Yo're a good guesser, feller. No, yuh don't need to look around; we've collected all yore guns. Be good—and save yore skin."

Chuckwalla swore impotently.

"They've got us cold," said Jimmy. "It's good-by to the cattle in Yucca Valley."

"I suppose you fellers got Steve and Sundown," said Chuckwalla.

"What you don't know won't never hurt nobody."

"How about cookin' a little breakfast?" suggested Jimmy.

"You set right where yuh are, feller."

IT WAS eight o'clock by the old clock over the fireplace. Somewhere outside a horse nickered softly. One of the masked men ran to a front window. Two riders had spurred through the big gate, and were coming toward the house.

It was Tom Smalley and Arkansaw Pickert. Sheep scattered from the galloping horses. One of the sheepmen covered the three cowboys on the bed.

"One yelp, and I'll kill yuh," he warned.

Without any formality the sheriff and deputy threw the door open and nearly ran into a menacing gun barrel. Both men were panting heavily, never expecting an ambush. Quickly they were separated from their guns and ordered to sit on the bed.

"Well, of all the damn fools!" wailed Arkansaw. "We was so excited over them sheep that we never thought about anybody bein' here."

"How come yo're out here so early?" asked Jimmy.

"Stayed all night in Palmville, tryin' to find out somethin' about that dead man the buzzards almost ate up. There wasn't a thing on him to show who he was, except a silver ring with a square turquoise settin'."

"Tex Archer!" exclaimed one of the masked men. "So that's what became of him, eh?"

"Tex Archer, eh?" muttered the sheriff. "That was the man who came with Buck Reach. Well, it might interest yuh to know that Hagar was in Gateway yesterday, havin' a talk with Reach."

"Yeah, we know that."

"Yuh didn't know that Reach lied to Hagar, didja?"

"What do yuh mean?"

"I mean that Reach was dyin' when I

left there. He knew he was dyin'—and he told me the truth."

"Yea-a-a-ah? He did, eh? And what did he tell yuh?"

"He told me enough to send me over here to get the S Bar T boys to help me finish the job."

"The hell he did! And now yuh can't do a thing. Ain't that too bad?"

Tom Smalley was lying about Buck Reach, but it had an effect on these masked men.

"So Buck is dyin', eh?" queried one of them. "He wasn't dyin' when Hagar talked with him."

"How about cookin' some breakfast?" asked Jimmy again. "I'm hungry."

"You stay hungry, feller. Jist set there on the bed and keep the weight off yore feet."

Smalley swore softly, as the sheep came bleating around the door.

"Where do yuh suppose Steve and Sundown went?" he asked.

"Hagar got 'em," declared Chuckwalla.

"Hagar—hell!" snorted one of the men. "Steve Treadway sold out to Hagar yesterday. They signed the deed in Moon City, got the money and pulled out. Steve Treadway couldn't face the music, an' he took Sundown West with him. Hagar's got a perfect right to bring sheep in here. Put that in yore pipe and smoke it."

"Yo're a liar!" exploded Chuckwalla. "Steve never did!"

The man laughed harshly. "For two-bits I'd shoot yuh for that remark, Sands."

"I don't doubt it," replied Chuckwalla dryly. "Yore kind would shoot a man for less than two-bits."

The other man stepped over to a window, where he peered out for several moments.

"All right," he said to the other man. "Everythin' is set; I'll get the horses."

And as he stepped to the doorway, the clatter of a rifle shot echoed against the rocky rim. The man at the doorway cursed softly, as several shots rang out.

"Hell's busted loose!" he snorted. "Keep 'em covered, until I get the horses."

THERE was little sleep for the three men and the girl that night, and at the first peep of dawn Sundown was studying the trail below them. As far as he could see the trail was a mass of bedded sheep. Two herders were in sight and were beginning to work their herds for an early start.

"It will take us a couple hours to work our way to the end of the pass, even if things go right," said Sundown. "This may be the end of the trail for all of us, if Hagar knows we're comin'."

"Let's go," said Steve. "It's a fine mornin' to get shot."

Rita was nervous, but anxious to see it through, as they rode in single-file down that narrow trail from the cliffs. One of the herders saw them and gestured wildly to another herder, who merely stood there, staring, wondering, perhaps, where these riders came from.

They reached the trail and forced their horses through the sheep. They passed close to a herder, who looked at them blankly; merely an ignorant peon, who knew nothing beyond working with sheep. It was slow traveling, but much faster than if the sheep had been started ahead. Sundown led the way, swinging a rope-end to drive the sheep aside.

No one questioned their right to be riding the trail. Herders stood aside, watching them indifferently. Sundown's estimate of the time required to reach the Pass was too short. A glance at his watch showed it was past eight o'clock, as they cautiously began forcing their horses through the sheep.

At any moment they expected to be stopped. In this narrow pass one man could hold off an army. But no one stopped them, as they spewed out into the open along with the moving sheep. The gate and a lot of the fence had been torn down.

"Thank gosh, we're through!" exclaimed Steve. "C'mon; I'm goin' to play the last card I've got in my deck."

AS THEY spurred their horses into a gallop, five riders came up over a rise of ground east of the ranch-house. They were about three hundred yards away, but one of them swung up a rifle, and the bullet hummed off a rock in front of Sundown's horse.

The horse whirled around, but Sundown spurred it to face the four men, and flung up his rifle, as three of them shot at once, and Rita's horse went down, its neck broken by a bullet.

Sundown and Pelliser were off their horses, crouching low, as they flung bullets back at the attackers. But Steve was racing toward the house, as fast as his horse could run.

Two men spurred out from the side of the ranch-house, and Sundown thought for a moment that they were two of Steve's cowboys, but one of them fired quickly and Steve's horse seemed to turn a somersault, throwing Steve far in front.

Sundown ran to Rita, who was unhurt, but badly frightened. He drew her down behind the horse, crouching over her. Pelliser was shooting carefully from a prone position, and the bullets were kicking gravel all over him.

Sundown's bullet caught the man who had killed Steve's horse, and he was swept out of his saddle. The other whirled and tried to get over where the three men were firing together. Two of the five were apparently trying to reach the mouth of the Pass, while the others did the shooting.

Bullets thudded into the body of the dead horse, but Sundown kept Rita flat on the ground. Steve was back on his feet, running toward the house, like a drunken man, making no effort to join the battle. Sundown was loading and firing carefully. Another man went down, and their horses broke away, running crazily away from the noise. One man started to run after the horses, but went down in a sprawling heap, when a bullet drilled his right leg.

Sundown looked toward the mouth of the Pass, as he stuffed shells into the loading gate of his rifle, and he saw the two riders within a hundred feet of the cliffs.

As he turned and lifted his rifle, it seemed as though the whole world rocked and swayed from a terrific concussion.

It sprawled him across the dead horse, and for a flash he saw one side of Aztec Pass lifting into the air, toppling like a brick building in an earthquake. Then it buckled and fell in a cloud of smoke and dust.

For several moments Sundown was completely dazed. Pieces of the cliffs thudded around them, and the sky seemed to rain gravel. But luckily none of them were hit. Pelliser was sitting on the ground, spilling cartridges in his haste, laughing foolishly.

There was more shooting now, and Sundown realized that Steve was firing from beside the house. Two men were running after their loose horses, realizing that things were breaking badly for them. Three men were down.

SUNDOWN got to his feet and helped Rita. She was white, shaken, but unhurt. Men were running toward them from the ranch-house—Tom Smalley, Arkansaw Pickert, Chuckwalla Sands. A loose horse, reins dragging, walked past Sundown, and he caught the reins.

Arkansaw yelled at him and pointed toward the east. As Sundown swung into the saddle he saw a rider swinging toward the east, three hundred yards away. Sundown spurred his frightened horse and went thundering across to intercept the rider. It was one of the two riders, who had failed to reach the pass ahead of the explosion.

The man was riding stiffly in the saddle, hatless, but seemed to be making little effort toward forcing his horse. Sundown,

swinging a gun in one hand, crowded his horse in close, causing the other horse to break its stride, and a moment later he was gripping the reins and had stopped the horse.

The rider was Jack Lance, his arms tied tightly to his sides, his feet roped together beneath the horse's belly. It was no wonder he had made little effort to escape. He looked blankly at Sundown, as the blue-eyed cowboy laughed at him, swung his horse around and they started back toward the S Bar T ranch-house.

But the folks were all walking toward Aztec Pass, hurrying, with Steve Treadway, limping badly, but in the lead. Sundown reined around and cut back toward the Pass. Jack Lance said nothing.

Bull Hagar was sitting on the ground, where the explosion had thrown him, his fat face cut by flying gravel. Rita cried out sharply when she saw Jack Lance, and he smiled grimly.

"So Bull Hagar had another prisoner, eh?" gritted Steve. "You was quite a collector, Bull."

The big sheepman nodded grimly and wiped the blood from his face.

"Well, what the hell does it all mean?" asked the sheriff. Bull looked at Sundown and shifted his eyes to Pelliser.

"So you three got loose, didja?" he muttered.

"Jist in time for me to play that last ace I told yuh I was savin' to use in yore little game," said Steve. "Hagar, I've had two hundred pounds of dynamite planted in that Pass for over a year. The wires run down to the ranch-house. Now, I want that forged deed to the S Bar T, before we hang yuh."

Bull Hagar licked his lips thoughtfully, and finally reached in his pocket and took out the paper.

"I know when I'm whipped," he said.

"I hope you know enough to tell the truth," said Sundown.

"If it suits my purpose, I can."

"Did Jack Lance kill Judas Priest?"

THE sheriff whistled softly and looked at Jack.

"Yo're a liar," whined Lance. "I never killed him."

"Bugs Hinkey said Jack killed him," replied Hagar.

"And Jack Lance killed John Ames," said Sundown. He killed him and forged Judas Priest's name to an unsigned will. He killed Judas Priest in Frisco, to prevent Priest from destroyin' that will, when Priest knew his daughter wasn't goin' to marry Lance."

"Go ahead," grinned Hagar. "Yo're a smart boy."

"Jack Lance murdered Bugs Hinkey at a hitch-rack in Palmville. It was either Lance alone or Lance and some of his gang."

"Are you guessin', or are yuh sure?" asked Hagar.

"He's guessin' all of it," declared Jack Lance. "He can't prove anythin' he says. Why, he's crazy."

Sundown stepped closer to Bull Hagar, who looked at him curiously.

"Hagar, you ain't got a chance in the world. If they don't give yuh the rope, you'll never live to finish the sentence they'll give yuh; so yuh might as well tell the truth. I know why yuh captured Lance. It was because he double-crossed yuh.

"You own the 7UR outfit, Hagar. That brand was created to steal the JP cattle. It's a cinch to alter a JP to a 7UR. You aimed to break the Priest outfit, and Jack Lance was yore man. Him and his gang was ridin' the rims and watchin' Aztec Pass. It gave 'em a fine chance to run out bunches of JP stock, where yore riders could pick 'em up and take 'em to the 7UR.

"It all worked swell, until Jack forged Priest's name on that will and became half owner of the JP. Then he didn't want to play yore game any longer. He forged yore name on a letter to Miss Priest, tryin' to have me driven out of the Valley and he forged the signatures on that deed. That note we found on Bugs Hinkey, tellin'

somebody that there would be a dance, was a note to Jack Lance, demandin' that he have a hundred head of cattle in the Pass on the night of August tenth.

"But he wasn't there. Buck Reach and Tex Archer came through to have a talk with Lance, and the JP gang shot 'em up. I dunno what became of Archer, but I know Reach is in Gateway, all shot up. You got the truth from Reach, didn't yuh?"

Bull Hagar laughed bitterly.

"Where did you figure all this out, Sundown West?" he asked.

"Bein' a solitary prisoner gave me plenty of time to figure out a lot of things," replied Sundown, "And them walls wasn't so awful thick."

"I should have given yuh the job you was lookin' for," said Hagar wearily. "You couldn't have wrecked things any worse for me. I thought yuh was dangerous, but Lance said yuh wasn't. Lance double-crossed me, when he refused to run any more cattle. It was our scheme to ruin the JP."

"How much of a hand did Lance have in the kidnappin' of Miss Priest, Hagar?"

"Bugs told me that Lance engineered it. I didn't know a thing about that deal. I reckon Lance saw a chance to take a bunch of money away from Priest. He had Bugs go over there, so he'd have one man he could be sure about."

"What about my own case, Hagar?"

"You? Oh, that rustlin' job? Well, I might as well tell all I know. I had no hand in it. Lance and Ike Carver framed it. Priest wanted to get rid of you; so the two boys accommodated him."

Sundown turned to Jack Lance, whose face was the color of wood ashes. He could see the shadow of the rope, and it terrified him.

"Is that true, Lance?" asked Sundown. "Lyin' won't help yuh."

"Carver's dead," said Lance bitterly. "The truth can't hurt anybody but me. Yes, we framed yuh, West; we should have killed yuh."

A RIDER came galloping from the ranch-house, hat in hand, riding swiftly. It was Swan River Pete, white of face and so excited he could hardly talk.

"I—I seen the sheep!" he yelled. "I seen the sheep and I come a-hellin'! I seen the sheep and—sa-a-ay! What the hell has been goin' on around here? Bull Hagar—Jack Lance——"

"Everything is all right, Swan River," said Rita, choking over her words. "The pass is blocked—and—and Sundown West never stole those cattle. He wasn't working for Bull Hagar."

"Well, can yuh imagine that?" snorted the old man.

"I reckon we better pick up the cripples," said the sheriff. "It's a long ways to the doctor."

"I'll dig up enough horses," offered Steve. He turned to Sundown and took him by the arm.

"I'm still yore boss, Sundown," he said. "Mebbe I won't be yore boss much longer, but I'll give yuh one last order. You git that girl on a horse and take her home. We'll handle all this."

One of the boys helped Rita on a horse, and they rode away from the ranch, riding knee to knee, as partners should. There were a few sheep scattered along their path, but these two riders paid no attention to a few sheep. Aztec Pass was closed forever and the sheep menace of Yucca Valley was a thing of the past.

Old Swan River sighed deeply, as he watched them ride away.

"Well, I'm the loser, that's all," he said.

"Where do yuh figure you lost?" asked Arkansaw. "And what did yuh lose?"

"A drink. I refused and called him a damn sheepherder."

Arkansaw laughed, as he coiled up a rope. "But you'll get yore job for life now, Swan River."

"Yeah, that's right. And unless all signs fail—so will Sundown."

THE BLACK SHEEP LAUGHS

By FRANK J. LEAHY

Author of "Pressure," "The Knife," etc.

And his jest was to be found beneath the waters of treacherous seas.

THE voyage was long over with, thank the Lord, but, tough as it was with a roaring gale that lasted for the better part of a week and left us wallowing in a bottle-green sea under a jury rig, I was kind of grateful for every howling and cracking gust that drove us far off our course, and here's why—I met Sherwood Gormley, a man with the timeliest laugh I've ever heard.

I'd signed as second mate on the old square-rigged three master, *Jetta Wilkes,* in ballast, Brisbane to Suva and Apia for copra. Thirteen days out a gale caught her and gave her a dance across the Coral Sea that had anything beat I'd ever experienced before, and since—well, anyway, with her rigging broken and her masts reduced to jagged stumps, we just had to figure on some place to beach her, for she was making water like a wicker basket.

But we were in a landless sea, according to our water-blurred chart and sodden Pilot Book. Furthermore, the chronometer had stopped, we hadn't seen the sun

since we'd lifted the Chesterfields, and, though we knew our latitude, we simply had to guess at our longitude. By dead reckoning, Captain Blounte thought that, running before the wind that had us fair with our measly rag of canvas, we could fetch the Louisiades in three or four days, if we were lucky enough to keep afloat that long.

But we did better than that.

We surprised ourselves by fetching an uncharted rock formation shortly after the next crack of dawn. It looked like the lee shore for us, I'll tell you, and we jumped to haul the *Jetta* by the wind to miss those rocks which stood, surf-whitened, dead ahead, and though she was battered and sluggish, we managed to bring her to within a quarter mile of complete shipwreck.

And while we were catching our breath we rubbed our eyes when we saw a boat coming off, pulled by a white man and a black man.

Well, sir, the white was this Sherwood Gormley in the flesh. We thought he was a marooned sailor, looking for salvation, but he fooled us. He recognized the time of it we'd had and he didn't waste words as he climbed aboard, but advised us of a kind of a place, a cove where we could put her if we knew our nautical stuff. We're doubtful of such a wild shelter, but he'd preceded us and ought to know what was what, and with him conning the *Jetta* from the rigging, we sounded with a lead and eased her, after a long, breath-holding time, into a kind of miniature valley between close granite walls. And there the water was as still as a lagoon and the wind had little play. There was a cutter in there, too, a neat-as-a-pin craft in which this chap and his one-man crew had come —from God knew where.

"At low tide," he said, "you'll be resting on the bottom, and you can calk your parted seams and get shipshape again. I'll help you," he added, "with the underwater work."

TALK about your Good Samaritans and such people! We made the *Jetta* secure and then battened him down to explain his presence on these unheard-of rocks, and he told us he'd been there a month, sailed from Bali, that little Dutch Indian island off Surabaya, and was searching for a Hindu image of worship that's recently been stolen from a Balinese temple, supposedly by the crew of a tramp five-master that had called out of Singapore.

"The Balinese are, to some extent, devout worshippers of the Hindu Pantheon," he goes on, "and this stolen piece of furniture is a gem-studded image of that many-armed divinity, the Great God Siva."

Well, I, for one, snorted inwardly. This Sherwood Gormley guy knew his natural, mid-ocean drydocks, but otherwise, I concluded, he'd got a couple of flapping halyards in his head.

But he didn't look it. No, sir. He was as fine a looking specimen of clear-eyed, sea-going sanity, brown as the lug sail of a junk ship and as husky as a pirate, as old Diogenes could have found with his lamp. He was bare to the waist, and he wore a pair of bleached dungarees, and that was all.

"What's it to you," I asked him, "about all this Siva business?"

"It's just a little experiment in something to do," he said with a shrug. "I'm a kind of a black sheep son of a missionary, and I've lived in and out of Bali for five years. I know the archipelago from Sarawak to Port Moresby, and, because the five-master sailed for Sydney, via Torres Strait—putting into no place en route, by the way—I took it upon myself to merge my nautical lore with a smattering of detective ability and do what I could to recover the image."

"But about these rocks?" blurted our mate.

"The dastardly deed," said Sherwood, "had all the earmarks of having been done by the crew of the five-master. What did that mean to me but that they'd dispose of the booty before they fetched Sydney,

even if it had to be chucked overboard. I suppose I lost some of my cocksuredness when I learned she cleared Cape York and entered the open Coral Sea, but I kept on, and one day I lifted these rocks. And, gentlemen," he says, "I'm glad I did."

"Why?" Captain Blounte wanted to know.

"Because," replied Sherwood, "the Siva image is here—believe it or not. Come along and I'll show you where."

"Not for the skipper. He'd got a ship to worry about and he was all for all hands turning to on her while the weather was fine and clear. But he must have seen a look in my eye, for he gave me leave to follow this Gormley-guy.

SO THE black sheep and I dropped into his cutter's life boat which he gestured his black man to bring alongside, and we pushed across the kind of drydock place to a point around a narrow, wind-moaning passage. There we stepped out onto the slippery granite at the base of a sheer hundred-foot wall, and he led off into a three- to five-foot crevice in the rock where we waded hip-deep, then ankle-deep, then neck-deep through angry water. We balanced ourselves from being swept off our feet by clinging to either scarred wall with outstretched hands. About forty feet of that and we entered a cavern—an irregular-shaped hollow in the rock that was roofed except for a crack through which the sun streamed. The walls were black, and then again they were red, as if there was blood streaming down them. They were slimy in places with moss and sea-growths, and they led straight downward to enclose a kind of sullenly eddying pool the color of violet—deep water, I knew damned well; perhaps ten fathoms deep; only about three-quarters transparent. It was a kind of a cavern, about fifty feet across, that made me think as I gave it a typical second mate's eye that it was volcanically belched into existence, like a bubble, to harden into that form on striking the air.

"How do you like it?" Sherwood asked, and his words sounded harsh and unreal.

"It's a home," I replied. "Where do we go from here?"

"Follow me," he said, and led off again, now to emerge from the water and crawl up the side of the wall a couple of feet to an overhanging ledge. There was a lot of gear up there—line and what-not, and what looked like a five-gallon turpentine can converted into something else.

"What's this?" I inquired.

"That," he informed me, "is a diving helmet."

I guess I laughed or something. I'm a kind of a diver myself, but this piece of paraphernalia was a new one on me—a tin can, with a square hole cut in one side and a piece of glass glued over the hole. There was a piece of rubber hose fitted into the bung, and the bottom was cut out and shaped to fit down on the shoulders.

"It doesn't work very well under about a foot and a half of water," Sherwood confessed, "but I'll improve on it. You see," he said, "I didn't anticipate having to dive for this Siva thing when I started out."

I'D FORGOTTEN about Siva in the spellbound moment of looking into this cavern.

"You mean," I asked, "that this is where the cross marks the spot?"

For answer, he dropped flat on his belly and pointed down into the violet water.

"See it?" he said.

I dropped flat on the ledge, too, but I'd squinted too long at tropic suns from poop decks to have good eyesight or to see what he's pointing at. I took his word for it, though, that he knew the characteristics

peculiar to the God Siva and I let it go at that.

"Maybe," he suggested, "you've got some kind of a piece of gear aboard the *Jetta* that I can make a better diving helmet out of."

"We have, I hope," I retorted, "but how would you like to use a self-contained diving dress that I have of my very own?"

That got him. You should see him radiate surprise and gladness. He almost fell off the ledge, he was so excited. He wanted me to shake a leg back aboard the *Jetta* and break the dress out right now, but I saw that it was getting along towards evening, and I said tomorrow will do. I offered to take the dive for him, of course, but he surprised me by refusing the offer.

"This is my job," he said. "I've wasted four months getting this far, and I'll see the rest of it through myself."

Well, I shrugged or something, for it was okay with me.

WE RETURNED to the ship, and while the tide was out and the *Jetta* resting her keel in about six to ten feet of water in that rocky shelter all hands worked right on through to repair her aboveboard, and I was sent over the side to calk her with what oakum she carried. And in one interval that I came up to take a blow, Sherwood appealed to me to let him take a dive or two to get the feel of the dress that he'd never been rigged out in before. It was a good idea and I assented, and by the time the *Jetta* was as tight as our supply of oakum would make her, he knew a fundamental or two that he could remember on that dive he was set on making in the cavern.

By daylight the ship was pumped out, spare masts had been rigged, sails had been patched up, and she was fit to make it to Port Moresby, at any rate. It had been a good workshop, and we had Sherwood Gormley, black sheep son of a missionary, to thank for it.

"And now," said Captain Blounte to him, "let's clean up your damn' god business and we'll be on our way."

That was jake with Sherwood—and how! I've seen kids all enthused about rifling offshore rocks of sea-birds' eggs and the like, but this husky chap, while the tails of the rest of us are dragging from a long night's work, is as sparkling-eyed and ambitious as if that Siva image was an object of his own worship. I liked that, too. I was fed up on mugs signed from the beach who growled every time you piped them out of a stinking fo'c'sle. Here was this Sherwood-lad, after months of practically single-handed hardship, afire with the idea of sailing back to Bali with a gem-studded cargo. Where, when he'd first climbed aboard with his yarn, we'd all thought him in need of calking himself, he now had us with faces shining with suppressed anxiety. Even hard-boiled old Captain Blounte, who claimed to have seen all the sights and heard all the sounds. We not only wanted to help this lad, but to see this Siva arrangement that had tempted the crew of the five-master.

SO WE loaded the diving apparatus into the cutter's boat and he and I and a sailor picked our way across that wild sea-labyrinth, and after about an hour's work of getting the cumbersome gear through the crevice, we're back on the ledge in the cavern and ready for business. The sailor was with us to help me handle the diver's lines.

The cavern looked more eerie than ever this morning. The sun, filtering through that crack in the roof, just had it right to paint it into some kind of a story-book chamber of rainbow tints. That purplish-blue water, eternally disturbed, was streaked now with the reflections of the blood-streaked, green-grown walls. Our movements and our voices and even our breath echoed back at us above the far-away beating of the sea. As yesterday, I couldn't spot the Siva image at the bottom of that sinister pool, and I asked Sherwood if he could.

"No," he admitted. "You see the sun isn't just right yet. But it's there, of course, and I know the exact spot."

The sailor and I turned to on him then to get him rigged in the canvas suit and heavy shoes and belt and breastplate, and though he was pretty well schooled in what was in front of him, I ran over the details again before closing him up. But he was not listening, I knew. What 'd it mean to him that his helmet was connected to the oxygen chamber by tubes, or that his exhaled breath would pass through a valve to a chamber where caustic potash would absorb the carbonic acid, or that he inhaled through another valve air that was constantly being regenerated in its passage through the chambers—what did such technicalities mean to him when he was all school-girlish about laying hands on that image of something or other? But I was responsible for him, I felt, and, now that the time had come, I was not so fancy about letting him go down. Diving's a profession that's not to be snubbed. There're lots of pitfalls down under, and a man can never point his finger ahead of time at any of them. But it was pretty late for me to back out now.

"Here's a knife," I wound up. "A diver always carries one in case he wants to pare his fingernails or something."

I attached an extra line to his belt, dropped a descending line into the water, and instructed him to jerk four times on his lifeline when he's ready to be hauled. Then I closed him up, adjusted his breathing apparatus that he carried, like a knapsack, on his back, and the sailor helped me to help this roving, deep diving, black sheep son of a Bali missionary into that pool of churning purple ink.

DOWN we lowered him and down, giving him plenty of time to adjust for pressure. And when his lines went slack I knew he was on the bottom, and I figured he was down about eight fathoms. Imagine him even thinking he'd tackle any part of that depth with that tin can contraption he'd hammered out!

Right away, though, there were four sharp jerks on his lifeline.

I groaned. I couldn't help it. Here he wanted to be hauled before he was hardly wet all over. But I might have known it. He was scared of the pressure or something, so I answered with four jerks and the sailor and I took in the slack on his lines.

Then the lines grew taut and we couldn't budge him an inch!

I snarled some sailorese and it was echoed back at me by the granite walls. If he'd only lighten his suit, as I had instructed him. But even though he hadn't, he shouldn't be such a dead weight. . . .

I was stumped for a minute. Something was radically wrong! If I could only have seen him—but I couldn't, and neither could the sailor. So we kept a strain on the lines fit to drag us overboard, then it occurred to me that he was snagged or something, and we slackened off again and waited for another signal.

We waited for a full minute. And here's what happened during that time, according to Sherwood Gormley's own words when we did get him up:

THE instant his feet had struck the bottom he had looked around in the half-light to get his bearings and suddenly something had wrapped itself around his legs. He thought it was kelp and tried to step out of it, but the wrapping grew tighter. He got a little panicky then and signaled on his lifeline to be lifted free. And then another something wound itself around his breastplated shoulders and under his armpits.

Meanwhile, we're trying to haul him, but those things that were holding him refused to let him be taken away.

Then he saw a horrible shape appear out of a dark niche in the undersea granite. It was a shapeless kind of a mass and he couldn't identify it for a second.

It was attached to those bands that held him, anyway, and he tried to fend it off with his hands, and it felt slimy and pulpy and cold to his touch. He saw two big eyes in the center of the body staring at him.

Realization suddenly struck through his terror that he was in the folds of an octopus!

He felt like fainting. His flesh crept. But he recovered himself. He had got a knife in hand, and that arm was free. He knew he must keep it free till the body advanced a little closer from the retreat it had made after its first outward lunge.

He waited and so did the octopus. Then slack came on his lines, and he was thankful for that, for the bands around him loosened a bit.

And while he felt his tow-colored hair turning gray, there was a sudden movement of the ugly mass in front of him. It came for him, lunged against him, and a mouth opened as if to swallow him.

He drove down with his knife, buried the keen, curved blade between the eyes, and did his mighty best to rip through the slime of bloodless, boneless pulp that isn't flesh at all. There was a convulsion of the monster for a second, then the bands released him and dropped away, and he reached again to jerk frantically on his lifeline.

WELL, sir, when we'd hauled him and taken off his helmet, he was sheet-white. It was several minutes before I could make any sense out of the story he voiced in puffs and jerks. Then the color started coming back into his cheeks, and while I was wondering whether to take his weights or not, I heard him kind of snort. That snort was topped by a grunt, then a little chuckle of inward amusement.

Then came the laugh I told you I'm happy to remember. At first I thought he'd gone off his nut, but the laugh was too healthy for that. It just kind of rippled at first, then it grew to a loud guffaw that filled that eerie mid-ocean cavern with vibrations and echoes that must surely have reached that octopus to make it chuckle in its grave.

And, finally, our black sheep explained.

"An eight-armed octopus and an eight-armed image of the Great God Siva," he said, "look a hell of a lot like sisters under the skin of a few fathoms of water."

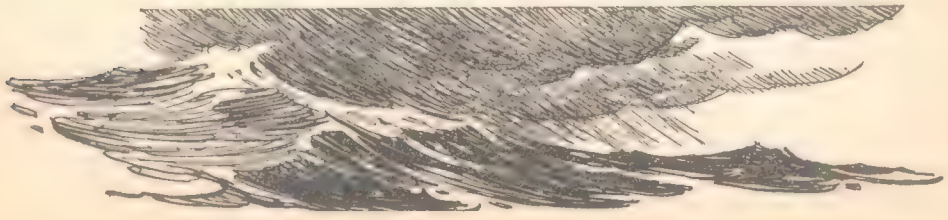
"To some people," I sneered.

And he's off again to finish his laugh.

A timely gesture, I'll always hold.

I CALLED at Bali about a year later in a barkentine. I looked up Sherwood Gormley and he told me the Siva image was found in possession of some native scamps right on Bali two days after he'd sailed from there.

So I've been laughing ever since.



And the fate of more than one man was to be settled where those jungle paths divided.

THE FATE OF A MAN

By L. CLIFFORD

Author of "Blank Cartridges," "Allegiance," etc.

SOMEHOW, that day in Jolo stands out as the brightest and most melodramatic I can remember. Odd, too, because it was probably exactly like every other sunny day in Sulu. We paraded just before sunset; all the Scout troops, and what few white corps troops were stationed with us. The Department Commander himself hung the Medal about Louie's neck.

Louie stood in front of the paraded line. He grinned a little at the distinguished guests. When we marched by to do him the supreme honor due a hero, I saw as I saluted, a rather pathetic grin fixed on his face. He was still wondering, and a little dazed at what had happened to him.

Then we went back to the officers' club,

built out over the bay, and drank milk punches.

The Medal of Honor has a crisp, light blue ribbon which is hung about the neck. The ribbon is flecked with little white stars; and the rather ugly bronze medal hangs awkwardly in front. It was still dangling on Louie when he arrived at the club. Knowing him so well, I suspected that with the crowd about and all, he was too self-conscious to remove it.

Most of the women came over to the club, too. In a lonely place like Jolo it wasn't often there was an excuse for celebration. The dice boxes rattled on the porch tables. People shook hands with Louie. Then the post band got to going. Of course the women started dancing.

Louie just sat drinking the punches people thrust at him—and watching the Blake girl. I knew he had been pathetically obsessed with her ever since she stepped off the Interisland transport. So had a good many others. She was one of the few women I have ever seen that the tropics couldn't dim. She always looked as if she had just arrived from some cold and distant country. No sallowness about her.

THE Blake girl's father was our commanding officer: a regular, brevetted to the Philippine Scouts as a major. That had made Elsie a cut above a Scout Lieutenant like Louie. And Louie had been hypersensitive about it. He'd got morbid sometimes at night. I'd be reading in the quarters we shared—or perhaps sitting on the moon-bright porch, listening to the hop music from the club. Then Louie would blunder up the steps. Hop not half over; but he'd be back. Full of liquor. Then he'd tell me about her——

I had got tired of it.

"Why don't you ask her, anyway? The worst she can do is turn you down."

"That's it," Louie said. "So I won't do it. It's better this way."

"You're as good as she is. She'll end up married to some officer. They all do."

"But not a Scout. What can I offer her? Stuck over here all my life . . . an officer of native troops. Can't even get promoted beyond a captaincy. . . ."

"Other women have done it. Fine women. If a woman loves a man——"

"That's just it. She doesn't."

"Make her then."

"She's over there now . . . dancing every dance with a cavalry officer from Manila. The bird's lousy with decorations. Even got a Medal of Honor. That's the sort of thing she likes. . . . I . . . I couldn't stand it. . . ."

"So you got tight and made it worse."

He had sunk heavily into a chair in front of me. I had felt really sorry, seeing the misery in his bloodshot eyes.

"Peck, I queered myself tonight—*right.*"

"Fine," I said. "Now maybe I've heard the end of it. Maybe I can get a little peace around here nights."

He went on stubbornly. "I got ugly, watching her with that hero. I drank a little too much, I guess."

"I guess you did," I said unfeelingly, "If your present condition is any criterion."

"It's all gone out of me now. I bawled her out. I asked her if you had to have a Medal of Honor to dance with her. She got mad, Peck . . . she's . . . she's a beautiful thing mad, Peck. . . ."

I made no comment on that. I had seen a house boy of hers strike a *lavandera* on her back porch one day, and I remembered just how Elsie Blake had looked. But Louie had forgotten that I was supposed to be his audience. If he'd been alone he'd have kept right on talking.

"', . . Yes,' she said, "and you have to be sober. When you make the grade come back.' "

"You heard the news tonight?" I asked casually.

"No . . . what news?" Louie said without interest.

"We're going after Dato Butu. The adjutant was by a while back and told me. There's your chance for a medal, Louie."

He had come to life at that. His eyes lighted—flamed with inspiration.

"By God!" he had said softly. "I'll show her!"

And he rose and stalked out of the house.

THE battalion was lying at the edge of the jungle cover. All night the troops from Jolo had moved through the black trails to concentrate about the mud-walled *cotta* that topped the barren, volcanic peak of Bud Suliman. The morning sun was now high. A silence like death brooded. Pitiful huddles that had once been men dotted the smooth slopes of the hill. For the first attack had failed miserably.

The outlaw Moros, more than five thousand strong, had listened, inspired, to the incantations of the *panglimas*. Allah himself had sent auguries to inflame their imagination and cement their faith. This day the infidel dog would suffer for the indignities and slavery he had foisted on a free people.

Five white officers were killed in the first attempt to assault those implacable walls. The major himself wounded. Through the bamboo tubes, set craftily in the walls of the *cotta*, a stream of death-dealing slugs had poured. Vicious little brass cannons had belched hot scrap iron which ripped through the jungle vines and tore hideous wounds.

There was no artillery. No machine-guns. Just the rifle and the bayonet to win a way up that blazing slope. The wounded twisted and groaned under the white heat of the sun. It was certain death to leave the cover where the little brown soldiers lay flat on their faces, their dog-like brown eyes peering patiently at their officers.

Louie's company lay next to mine. I was drinking from my hot canteen when he crawled over and lay beside me. He was grinning. He passed me a bottle that he drew from his haversack.

"Take a pull of this," he said thickly. "Good for what ails you."

I looked at the bottle. Hennessey Three Star. I wanted it badly. But in spite of what you hear, that's one thing an officer can't do when he's commanding men. Especially in action. I felt a little sick as I looked at Louie.

"No!" I said. "For God's sake don't let anyone see!"

I looked hastily about. Most of the officers in sight were lying flat, with their elbows propped, staring, through their glasses, up that heat shimmering hill. But there was one, the first lieutenant of my own company, watching. A man named Jacoby—a sour, sarcastic sort of chap, who fancied himself with the women. He'd taken a girl of mine once, so naturally I had no use for him.

BUT then the big excitement came and I didn't think any more about it. They called for volunteers to take dynamite up the hill. The only chance, for there wasn't a grenade in the whole outfit. I think they expected only some of the enlisted men to go; but God knows why those poor little brown fellows should have been expected to expose themselves to certain, horrible death with their officers merely looking on. Louie fooled them. He was on his feet at once, clamoring for the chance. They had to let him go. The senior captain, wise in the ways of the native soldier, must have realized that an officer would have to lead them.

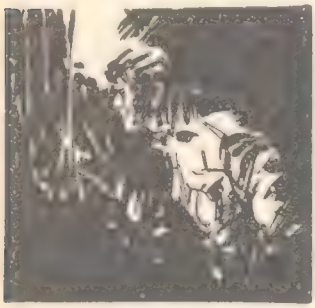
Louie grinned at me as he tossed his equipment down about his feet.

"Here goes, boy!" he whispered. "I'll get me one of those *things* today or I won't come back. Here's where I get plenty dances."

They broke cover so suddenly the Moros were taken off guard. The little band was half way up the hill before a blaze of fire greeted them from the *cotta* walls. The Moro loves boldness in a fighting man. The crest of the hostile battlements were black with tribesmen cheering them as they

came on—and pouring slugs into the ground about them.

Louie and one Scout soldier reached the cover of the walls alive. The others lay, ripped with bullets, scattered along the slope. The rest is Scout history. To the Moros their god had betrayed them.



This magic that fell upon them from the skies and tore the very heart out of their citadel to them had no precedent in warfare. At the first perception of their panic the Scouts closed in to the assault. The thing was over in another half hour.

Elsie Blake had been in Manila on a visit when all this happened. She had come back to Jolo on the boat that brought the General and his staff. So Louie hadn't seen her since the hop night until, surrounded by the usual bodyguard that were always after her, she came up onto the club porch that day.

I was curious to see what would happen. You must understand that Louie was my best friend. And the Blake girl—well, if I'd thought I stood a chance——"

I KNEW she'd been at the decoration ceremony. And somehow, from my observation of her and many quiet talks, I had a sneaking suspicion that Louie had a better chance than he knew. She was one of those women a man has to go for—outright, almost with bravado. Any simulation of indifference, or hint of humility annoyed her.

"You'd better cut out that drinking," I said, pushing closer to Louie. "Here she is now, and you've won your damned medal. Don't spoil it all with a whisky breath. Go take her away from those birds."

I was startled at his sudden defiance. Louie wasn't the sort of chap to let anything go to his head, I always supposed. But now he sort of swelled up. He was almost haughty.

"I guess she knows I'm here," he said.

I looked towards the crowd around Elsie. Apparently she was refusing to dance with all of them. She sat there on the rail with her back to the bay. The low sun made an impossible glory of her hair. The cavalry fellow, with all the decorations was there. He was, I discovered, one of the general's aides. I saw the blue strip on his blouse that stood for the Medal of Honor, and I looked up at his rugged, rather sad face. I liked the looks of the fellow and wondered if, after all, I would have to dislike him for carrying off Louie's girl. I saw that Louie was watching him sullenly.

Jacoby, too, was close to Elsie. He was a man who ogled freely, and I instinctively resented the way he leaned against the girl. She seemed utterly unaware of Louie.

I kept thinking:

"You ass—why don't you jump up, move over there in a few long strides! Drag her away from them! *Make* her dance. It's *your* day, isn't it?"

I noticed they all looked briefly towards where Louie sat. Jacoby was saying something. Something unpleasant, because I knew that nasty curl of his lips. I'd seen it enough, God knows, when he was in temporary command of the company, and jumping on me for practically nothing.

I moved towards them.

"Hello Elsie! Fine time in Manila—new clothes and all."

"Peck, dear!" She knew I was a noncombatant as far as she was concerned. She dropped all defenses with me, therefore.

I shook hands with the cavalry captain. I noted that Jacoby was already a little tight. He kept pulling at Elsie, urging her to dance. She swung about on her hips and stared out at the sunset color on the water. She didn't even answer Jacoby's urging. She drew in a quick, startled sort of breath as she looked out

across the water. Somehow, her spontaneous appreciation of the scene affected us all. Even Jacoby shut up.

"It's something, isn't it?" the cavalryman said quietly. "That funny Chinese Pier, the native pearl boats, the color on the water——"

"It stinks," Jacoby said. "I'm sick of it—sick of it all."

The cavalry officer looked at him briefly.

"Maybe the Almighty didn't fix it up for you," he said. Then he laughed and I realized that he, too, had been drinking a bit too much.

Elsie said nothing. It dawned on me that the return home, the color and all, and, I suppose the band at the moment playing *Auf Wiedersehen,* was getting to her a bit.

I said, "Let's go over and congratulate old Louie. Have you seen him since you came back, Elsie?"

IT SEEMED to me that she shuddered a little as though to shake herself out of her reverie. She smiled brightly at me and turned from the darkening water. The Chinese boys were putting on the lights.

"I want to meet that chap," the cavalry officer said. "Smart thing he pulled there at Bud what-do-you-call-it? Must be a grand guy."

I saw that sneer come back on Jacoby's face, and suddenly I realized that, if only beginning tonight, he was hot out after Elsie.

"He is a grand guy," I said and I looked my first lieutenant carefully in the face.

The cavalry officer led the way towards Louie. He was still sitting there, paying no attention to the several men at the table with him. His eyes were fixed and staring out across the porch rail towards the sea. When we got there they got up, Louie more slowly than the rest. I could see that already he had drunk too much. And I knew the reason. Elsie Blake had not come running to him—as the others had; on this, his big day. She had, in fact, acted as though he weren't there.

Louie greeted her carefully and coolly. As though, not two months, but two days had elapsed since their last meeting in this very place. The other officers left us and the cavalryman picked up one of the untouched drinks. Elsie never once looked at Louie after we had seated ourselves.

"Let's toast the new medal," the captain said.

Louie didn't look at him. I could see that he was insanely jealous and conceded the man from Manila victory. Victory that he was about to rub in.

Elsie said, "Really, I have to go. Dinner's ready and father's funny about women going to the club."

JACOBY took a detaining grip on her arm. I saw Louie watching him. The last drink Jacoby had taken hadn't done him any good.

"Have a drink, Elsie," he said.

We all knew that Elsie had never had a drink in her life. Elsie shook his hand off. She was frightfully annoyed. The bandsmen were putting up their instruments. Except for a few noisy lieutenants inside at the bar, we were alone there in the club.

Elsie got up briskly and stood, looking down on us.

Any other woman would be a little bewildered now, annoyed; maybe pathetic, I thought. She's in the hands of three drinking men who are more or less at swords' points—who don't want her to leave. But she's going. Even if she has to go alone. And there's her pride. She's the commanding officer's daughter; and besides the most beautiful girl in the Islands—maybe in the world.

Jacoby got unsteadily to his feet.

"I'll toast the medal," he said, and his lips curled in that nasty sneer as he looked at Louie. I think we all knew something was going to happen then. Something awful. The cavalry captain laughed placatingly, nervously.

"I'll take you home, Elsie," I said.

Jacoby said, "No . . . no. We're all

going to have a drink. When a man wins a Medal of Honor drunk it ought to be celebrated in liquor—" He turned and leered at Elsie. "I was telling her awhile back why we had to stand in that blazing sun parading——"

I tried to laugh. To shut Jacoby up.

"Orders," I said. "Orders. Curse of the army. Come on, Elsie."

Louie got up slowly. He was across the table from Jacoby and he leaned towards him, his hands gripped hard against the edge. So slow and deliberate were his first movements that none of us was prepared for what was about to happen. Then, like a vicious young monkey, Louie sprang around the table and struck Jacoby repeatedly and terrifically about the face. Jacoby went down. I got to Louie; and the cavalryman lifted Jacoby to his feet and subdued his furious struggles to get at Louie.

Elsie Blake just stood there. The look in her eyes as she stared at Louie was memorable. Bitter with contempt. Her face had gone very white.

Jacoby shook himself at last away from the big aide. He turned his back on us and walked swiftly from the porch. I released Louie then. The tightness of his face was gone slack. His eyes became more morose than sullen. He moved to the rail and stood looking down at the water. I watched him fascinated. His fingers moved, reached for the ribbon about his neck. I noticed for the first time how brown and strong his fingers were. Slowly, almost meticulously, he broke the ribbon where it fastened to the medal. He looked down at the bit of bronze in his hand. The lamplight glinted on the green enamel of the design. He tossed it carefully so that it would clear the rail. The place was quiet; and we could hear the faint plunk as it cut into the water below.

The cavalryman cleared his throat. He moved closer to Louie; laid a hand on his shoulder.

"'The fate of a man is bound about his neck.' So says the Koran. You can't get rid of it as easy as that. They're worse than any millstone that ever turned."

EARLY next morning a platoon was lined up in front of my company barracks. Jacoby was already there, inspecting them. When I saluted him, and spoke to him, he smiled and nodded in a most friendly way. It was odd: before he had always merely grunted and shot sour looks my way.

The captain was smoking his big, foul pipe in the orderly room.

"Company's taking the paratyphoid shot today; you'd better make the hike with Jacoby."

Only then I remembered and cursed myself for having come over so early. Captain Fletcher hated idling lieutenants.

"Do you good," he grinned. "And Jake's full of conversation this morning. He's landed the K. O.'s daughter at last."

"Not *Elsie!*" I said weakly.

"I don't know her baby names," Fletcher said. "But a man in love may lose his way, so you go along. These maps of ours are the works of visionary optimists. See here——"

He unrolled a crude blueprint of the Jolo area, weighting its curling edges with the ink pot and bound books or orders. Lines in red had been drawn, radiating from the Walled City to indicate patrol zones. For since the fight at Suliman, strong daily patrols had been sent out into the affected area to keep in touch with Moro activities, especially incipient *cotta* or intrenchment building.

The captain laid a wizened finger on the map. He moved it slowly to the west.

"Costello's company takes the south sector—along here. Your hare-brained pal Louie Moulton has the patrol today I

believe. Now this is ours. You see, at first you have to move over the same trail —that's in their zone, because there's no way of getting through the jungle in ours. Now here you see the trail branches. You take the right fork, of course. Check these little *barrios,* talk to the *taos,* make a special reconnaissance of the Parang area and camp near there for the night. Not *in* it, mind you. You're not to enter any *barrio.* Is that clear?"

I said it was, trying to dodge that awful *dobe* smoke. I was intensely annoyed. Here I should have had a day off!

The other outfit will camp at Maibung I suppose." His finger stopped on the map. He looked up at me sharply. "What's this about a row at the club between Moulton and Jacoby?" he said swiftly.

"I really don't know," I said instinctively.

He stared at me a long moment.

"You really don't *want* to know," he said dryly. "Well, my house boy was over there getting me some ginger ale. He saw it all. Jacoby's a nasty cuss when he gets started. Good soldier; but damned nasty. That's why I'm sending you along. They've got a common trail for all that way, and chances are they'll meet up. Jacoby may pull rank on him. I don't want that sort of thing; Moulton's on an independent patrol. You understand?"

He looked up at me fiercely. I nodded gloomily. I understood, all right. I was to be the witness if trouble occurred between my pal and this Jacoby if he got nasty and 'pulled rank'.

THROUGH the window I could hear Jacoby telling off the point; and I started to move off. Fletcher called to me (and it seemed prophetic to me afterwards), "None of this Wild West stuff now. You've read the last general order; it's a court for any officer who orders a shot fired unless strictly in self defense."

"I've no desire to get a barong into me. The walk's bad enough," I said in a way no second lieutenant should speak to a captain. But Fletcher was a great fellow. He grinned. "It's good for young men in the tropics," he said.

I fell in at the tail of the column, where I belonged, as the patrol moved out. But we were hardly out of Asturias before Jacoby called me up to the head of the file. He chattered amiably as we hiked into the dark, cool trail under the bending coco palms. I was amazed at the change in him—where I was concerned, anyway. Never before had he favored me with an unmilitary word.

As we plodded on at route order I noted that troops had been on ahead not long before. You could tell that by the mushed condition of the soft, damp trail. Louie's patrol, I thought; and I hoped they hiked fast so as to avoid us until they came to the fork in the trail and the consequent parting of the ways. Perhaps my study of the trail, and accompanying inattention set him to thinking. Or maybe it was mere idle talk—he was positively running over with words—but he suddenly called to the platoon sergeant:

"What outfit's in the other zone today, Sergeant?"

The sergeant named the company.

I was watching Jacoby's face. There were still marks on it from Louie's mauling: a faintly purpled eye, and the lips were still puffed. I noticed now that his teeth shut firmly. He tossed a half smoked cigar away.

"Who's in command?" he asked harshly.

THE sergeant looked a little startled. He eased his pack with a nervous hand. I could tell by the look on his flat face that he knew something of what had happened the night before. But whatever he may know about his officers, the little brown soldier will never speak.

"I theenk, sir . . . the *teniente* Moutoon".

Jacoby understood perfectly whom he meant.

"Pass the word to *sigue mas* up front there!"

The sergeant jerked his hand ferociously upward.

"Sigue! Listo! . . . Sigue mas!" he yelled at the connecting file ahead.

The pace increased at once. The men began to chatter, to laugh.

"Cut out that noise!" Jacoby roared.

There was instant silence in the ranks.

The only sounds now were from the squeaking, gabbling monkeys in the trees above us; and the slog, slog of the marching feet.

Before the hour was up we overtook the platoon ahead, squatted by the roadside for their five minute rest. We closed up on them, dropping a march outpost to the rear. Louie was sitting under a great banyan tree, his back fitted into the hollow of two arching roots. I filled my pipe and grinned at him.

"How about part of that armchair?"

He moved over, dropped his cigarette and crushed it out with the heel of his heavy marching shoe.

"We're just pushing on," he said and made to get up.

"Oh, sit still! Your men haven't anything against Jacoby, you know," I said irritably. I felt terribly sorry for Louie; and this was the first I had seen of him since the affair at the club. He'd been off somewhere all night, drinking I supposed, and he was gone when I got up that morning. Now he looked drawn and bad about the eyes. One awful hangover; you could see that with one eye sideways.

Jacoby was still standing in the trail. He bit the end off a londres cigar (that was another thing I hated about him; those vile, warped black things that stunk worse than a pearler) and looked impassively over the heads of the men.

Louie twisted his whistle in his fingers. As he put it to his lips Jacoby looked squarely at him. For a minute their glances locked. I stared at them brazenly; they were totally unaware of my existence.

There was a mocking look to Louie, a faint sneer about his mouth.

Jacoby's eyes were steady and ugly. He said coldly, "We'll continue the march together—as far as the Sibutu fork."

Louie said nothing; just continued to eye Jacoby in that insulting, almost flaunting way.

Jacoby lifted his arm. He stared briefly at his wrist watch.

"In three minutes," he said.

Louie blew a sharp blast on his whistle. His men sprang up like racers from a line. Mechanically they began to fall into a column of twos in the trail.

"You heard my order," Jacoby said.

"I take my orders from my captain," Louie said, and he turned to speak to his sergeant.

I WALKED up to him.

"Don't, Louie," I said as low as I could make the words without weakening them. "You know Army Regulations. Even independent forces meeting, the senior takes command. . . . All he wants is a chance to prefer charges against you. . . . Don't give it to him."

As I pleaded I drew Louie off the trail and behind the cover of the great banyan tree. Louie glared at me stubbornly. "You butt out of this," he said. "You've no business here anyway. To hell with him. And if he tries to get hard——"

Louie loosened the pistol in his holster; and with the other hand he pointed to his men, already neatly aligned along the trail. We both knew that if he gave the word those men, without the least thought, would turn about and fire cold bloodedly into their comrades of the other company. Anything might happen here. I used the final, desperate argument.

"Think of Elsie," I said.

"Elsie——?"

"Elsie Blake."

His red-rimmed eyes turned from the trail and looked into mine.

"What in hell of—Elsie Blake?" he said.

"She's going to marry him—Jacoby. That's all," I said. "If anything happened they'd say——"

He laughed hoarsely at that.

"So he got her, did he? He got her because I beat him up before her face! Well, to hell with Elsie Blake!"

"You want to make an ass of yourself," I said, "because of a damned fool girl? Throw away your commission because a man like Jacoby beats your time with a flapper? I once thought you were a soldier! Why, damn it all, you're playing right into his hands. He'll go back and tell her and I'll have to stand up as a witness against you. The two of them will have a grand laugh at Louie Moulton, M. H."

"She won't get a chance to laugh at me, damn her!" he said.

A wild, almost crazy look came into his bleared eyes. He sank his fingers into my arm until I could feel them, like searing tongs, pressing into the very bone.

"And let me tell you this," he snarled. "I'll win a Medal of Honor again—mark my bloody words! And I'll take the damned thing and throw it in her white, baby face!"

Jacoby blew his whistle then; and without another word Louie put himself at the head of his men. We moved out together like a peaceful company on the march; and towards noon approached the fork in the trail that was called Sibutu.

WE CAME out of the jungle into blinding sunlight. The ground rose sharply; and from the first ridge we could see far below us the deep blue of the Sulu Sea. A faint, hot wind fanned the *cogon* grass. The awful, metallic beat of the *cicadas* literally pounded at the eardrums. Sweat poured down the faces of the little brown soldiers. Their O. D. shirts were black with the wet from their aching bodies. The packs stuck, heavy and drenched against their shoulder blades. There was a dead quiet in the ranks because Jacoby had marched them cruelly; not a halt had been ordered since that first one of the morning.

I strode angrilly beside the first lieutenant. Since meeting Louie's platoon, there had not been a word from him. He chewed on the end of one of his rank *londres* and stretched his long legs viciously forward.

We marched down into a narrow, stifling valley. Toiling up the slope ahead we could see the men of the point. Then vines and small brush hid them. We saw the connecting file halt and raise his rifle.

Without a word the column halted; the men crouched, their rifles advanced, by the side of the trail.

"Now what in hell's the matter!" Jacoby rasped out, and he started forward at the run. I saw Louie look up at him as he went by him, and I could almost see the look that must have been in his eyes. But then, too, he must have thought that in a few hundred yards now, he would be free of it all. Free to march his men as he saw fit; to stare at the ground and think.

Jacoby passed out of sight behind some trees near the crest ahead. The point must be hidden there, I thought idly. Probably saw some *taos* working in a group and they wanted to be sure before they pushed into anything. The Scouts were more afraid of the wrath of their officers, always, than of any band of Moros that ever lived.

I thought I would light my pipe.

But the word came for me to go forward.

Louie was already striding along the trail ahead of me. He made no pretence of speed, though in the circumstances double time was the custom. He cursed as I went by him.

"They're *your* men—the point," I reminded him. "Better get along."

He said something I didn't hear. By the time I had my field glasses out of the vise-like case, I was crouching beside Jacoby. He was lying flat on his stomach, his glasses pressed against his eyes. Only one soldier was with him.

"Where's the point?" I said.

He made a motion with one of his hands, but never moved the glasses.

"They're moving forward through that swale," he grunted. "Or at least I hope

they are . . . two o'clock there . . . about five-hundred yards; see?"

I fixed my glasses on the locality he had described. Some two-hundred yards from the right branch of the trail there was a stubby, flat-topped hill. Rank grass and scattered bamboo covered its slopes. It stood out alone, dark and sombre against sullen, heavy white clouds.

"Putting up a *cotta* in front of our bloody faces," Jacoby said thickly.

I STEADIED my glasses. Men were certainly working about that hill; and I could see the flash of steel in brief, blinding reflections. Faintly came the sound of chopping.

Louie dropped negligently down beside me.

"Look," I said, and taking my glasses down, pointed it out to him. He had not even unlatched his case.

"A lot of *taqs* terracing for tobacco," he said. "It grows like hell on the south side of a hill like that."

Then he looked about him quickly.

"Where's my point?" He said it right at Jacoby who had taken his glasses from his eyes and was staring at him stonily.

"*The* point," Jacoby said clearly, "is reconnoitering forward. At my orders."

Louie stood up then. He stretched his arm out, pointing along the trail.

"There's the fork," he said, "a hundred yards below us. That gardening is going on in *your* zone, Mr. Jacoby."

As he spoke Louie raised his right arm above his head, with a careless, graceful gesture, then dropped it slowly to his side. I didn't pay much attention at the time, but realize now that he was signalling back to his platoon. Just at the moment we heard the sound of a shot from out in front. Louie began a slow, impassioned cursing. And he said, looking savagely at Jacoby, "You ought to get tried for this! They'd never have done that unless you gave them straight orders."

Louie meant that Jacoby had debauched his point. Although it really wasn't funny (for a scattered firing broke out just then) I almost laughed; because everybody knows that orders don't have to be very 'straight' to induce Scout troops to open fire on suspicious looking Moros. A mere hint is all that is needed.

I could see now that the Moros had taken hasty cover and that some were undoubtedy returning the fire of our point. The point itself, was now plain to be seen —four men flattened out behind an outcropping of rock some three-hundred yards to our right front, firing steadily, carefully, and with obvious enjoyment.

On the last words Louie stepped by us. Then he moved off at a dog trot and I could hear him still cursing. He paid not the slightest heed to the Moro fire nor seemed to realize that in a few minutes all the Scouts would be up on the line and that he stood an excellent chance of getting hit from behind. He charged right up behind those four busy little fellows out front like an incensed old nurse chasing up to her kid off on a lark in the park. He stood over them and kicked them impartially and vigorously to their feet. I watched their frightened faces through my glasses. They got up and hung their heads literally with shame as he yelled abuse at them. And all the time the Moros firing and Jacoby furiously shouting back towards our men in the trail.

IT WAS then we saw that Louie's outfit had gone ahead and were already well beyond the fork in the trail. Their sergeant had them halted there, some two-hundred yards from where we lay; and he

paid not the slightest attention to Jacoby's hoarse shouts nor to the messenger he finally sent down to him. And in the meantime Louie calmly strode across the front and rejoined his own platoon, his four disgraced little soldiers trotting on before him. The Moro fire had ceased, and it suddenly dawned on me that what there had been of it was strangely impotent and unbusiness like.

As our pltaoon deployed, fixing bayonets and fanning out on both sides of us, I watched Jacoby's face. I think then he realized that he had made a bad mistake; because with the naked eye you could see the Moros running from their hill and streaming in disorder back over the trail ahead.

But Jacoby was standing there, white faced, staring after Louie and his departing platoon. For without as much as a glance back, as soon as Louie came up with them, they marched off along the left trail without a bayonet being unsheathed. We watched them disappear in the mass of vines and bamboo ahead, then Jacoby said to the platoon sergeant:

"Get the men up," and to me, "Take four men and have a look at that hill."

When I rejoined the marching platoon on the trail I admit I enjoyed making my report.

"They were just cultivating, as Moulton said. Left some tools there and two dead *taos*. The rest of this trip won't be any fun."

"You keep your tongue in your head!" Jacoby said. "They had barongs in their hands didn't they?"

"Just working bolos"; I said, "and a few rifles probably in case a deer popped up, or to show they had 'em . . . like a kid with a whistle."

"They're not supposed to have arms," Jacoby said. "Serves them damned right."

"Their dato won't look at it that way," I said, "when they come hollering back into their barrio. If we do what's healthy, we'll march right back to Jolo now. While our heads are still on."

He didn't say anything to that. But he yelled up to the point, which was lagging.

WE MARCHED on through that heat as though we were off for a four-alarm fire. The first barrio we came to was deserted. Or seemed to be, because we saw no sign of man, woman, child, or dog. We pushed on. Not a Moro passed us on the trail, and this was odd because we were now in a populous part of the island and since the fight at Suliman, trade and community life had rapidly gotten back to normal. The next barrio we came to, which was a small one, was also apparently empty. I could see that Jacoby was worried. He glanced about at the nipa huts.

"Must be a religious day; everything shut up like a drum."

"It's worse than that," I said.

He looked at me sharply.

"Don't be an ass," he said.

But when we came to the next place, late that afternoon, although at first sight it appeared as deserted as the others, two significant events occurred. As we skirted the town we passed a wounded Moro, obviously dying by the side of the trail. A toothless hag bent over him. Red *buyo* juice dripped from her withered mouth. She spat at the men and screamed, "*Bisaya! Bisaya* dogs!"

The men started to jeer, because they were called Christian dogs, but Jacoby cursed them quiet. Then the *juramentado* came at us. Like a jack-in-the-box he sprang from the brush at the side of the trail, naked save for a red sarong, bound about his waist. His head was shaved and his eyebrows; and we could see the *bijuco givvies* binding him tighter than the bands on a cotton bale. He screamed as he came on and it was clear that he meant to take at least one infidel life before he trod the rose-strewn path to his Moslem paradise, Allah's promise to the *amok*.

The men killed him with rifle fire before he got within cutting distance; and as they prodded his squirming body with avid

bayonets, the hag sat there drooling and cursing them.

It was a scene that made the palms of your hands wet and clammy. I felt a little sick, and not a bit better when one of the corporals said to me in a low-voiced aside:

"We get hell ahead, *Teniente.* More better now we go back."

I thought so too; but we were both wrong. Aside from a sinister quiet in the barrios and along the trail, the rest of the march was uneventful. We made camp that night near the beach. And in spite of his oral deprecating of my warnings, Jacoby did have sense enough to put out a strong outpost. I admit that I hardly closed my eyes. There was a big moon and I lay there listening to the *gongs.* The night seemed alive with the sound; *gongs, agongs, kulingtangan, gabang*— I could distinguish the music of each. And it was more savage, more rapid than I had ever heard it. I lay there thinking of the jungle dramas I had seen on the stage. In them, always, there was the throb of drums—sinister prelude to the native uprising.

IN THE morning a Moro claiming to be a *satia,* or confidential messenger from *Panglima* Manuk, the local ruler of the district, came into the camp and sought out Jacoby. He made the moslem sign of greeting with great dignity.

"*Patik*. . . . your honor . . ."

"What in hell does this ape want?" Jacoby asked the sergeant, who spoke the Sulu dialect.

The sergeant was delighted that his countryman was called an ape. He burst out into swaggering questions .

"Only that we pay one hundred pesos for the dead Moros of yesterday, *Teniente.* Ho, ho! what a thing! Not five pesos in the platoon, I think!"

"Tell him to go to hell," Jacoby said savagely. "And to beat it before a rifle goes off accidentally."

"Listen," I said, and in spite of Jacoby's furious looks, I tried to placate the Moro. "Tell him," I said to the sergeant, "that we thought they were building a *cotta.* That we're sorry. That we'll make proper payment to the families."

I said this with all sincerity, for I determined right then and there that Jacoby was going to chip in with me on that little duty.

The sergeant looked at me as though he were a little dubious of my sanity.

"As you like, *Teniente*—but so far I have seen no Moro worth more than the fighting cock in his hands."

The Moro held out his hands, palms up.

"Now," he said, "the women of the dead wail and the stain of dishonor is on our people!"

"Fix your bayonet, Sergeant," Jacoby said. The sergeant complied eagerly, grinning.

The Moro moved off with a dignified stride after one last, rapidly-worded sentence.

"What's that?" I said.

The sergeant laughed.

"Good news, *Teniente.* He says there will be, in all truth, a *cotta* to pass on our way home."

"You heard that," I said to Jacoby.

"A lot of bull," Jacoby said. "Let's go."

WE MARCHED off with the sun not an hour above the sea behind us. We marched fast; and I was certain that our speed had nothing to do with military forethought, but everything to do with Elsie Blake. He wanted to be back there with her as soon as he possibly could. We passed by the same apparently empty barrios. We encountered no one. It was as though we walked through a country side peopled only with monkeys and chickens and a few apathetic, mangy dogs. The point moved watchfully, for word had gone through the platoon of the Moro defy, and the Scouts had learned by now that this proud and warlike race wasted no idle words in threats. Yet until we were about an hour's march from the fork in the trail not a hostile gesture was made. Then a

few ragged shots came from the high ground ahead.

Jacoby halted the column under cover. We had just passed a side trail that appeared to lead to the east. Jacoby crouched in a copse of banana trees and shook out his map. I knew then, by the look of anxiety on his hard face that his mind had been working along the same lines my own had.

"Bring up that empty pack horse," he said to the sergeant. "And I want a good man who can ride, to take a message . . ."

I was glad he had come to his senses. I looked over his shoulder as he wrote in his message pad. The message was to Louie and it read:

"Rejoin my command *via* MAIBUN-LAPARAN trail. Am continuing march to JOLO *via* PARANG.-JOLO trail. Expedite.

Jacoby,
1st Lt.

He filled in the blanks for Hour, Date and Origin. As he handed it to the waiting soldier and made him repeat the exact wording, I remonstrated.

"Aren't you going to explain? Under ordinary circumstances, he's not under your orders, you know."

He gave the soldier a few directions, warned him to gallop all the way, and as the man moved out he looked at me coldly.

"You're growing to be like that bird—insubordinate. Living with him so long I suppose. When I want advice from you, I'll ask for it."

And without another look at me he gave the order to advance.

THE scattered Moro covering force gave way before our skirmish line. The country was very open, cleared farming land, and they had no taste for our accurate, long-range fire. But they fired stubbornly as they went, and we had two men wounded slightly almost at once. I pleaded with Jacoby to wait for Louie for I was convinced that the Moros could not have gathered too strong a force for our two platoons at such short notice; but he merely glared at me.

Then he said, "If you've got cold feet go on across there and join your boy friend."

We pushed on slowly in the heat. We moved in bounds, cleaning the brush out ahead of us with fire, forming up and marching undisturbed for some distance, then deploying again. It was slow and discouraging work. But the worst of it was that by now we realized that it was only a preliminary: that hill ahead by the fork in the trail was going to be the place. It was perfectly situated tactically: there was no way of dodging it save by literally cutting our way through almost impassable jungle that closed in from both flanks.

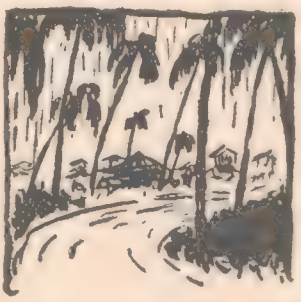
Then we came to another trail junction. Again Jacoby halted under cover and pored over his sweat-stained map. And while we were lying there our messenger galloped up from the rear. I brazenly read the signal corps form the soldier handed expressionlessly to Jacoby. It said:

"Have no orders placing me under your authority.

Moulton,
Lt."

Jacoby let out a long, hyphenated oath. Then his face went white with anger. He shook the thing in my face.

"You see that!" he said thickly. "You're witness to it."



"I see that Louie's within his rights. All you've got to do is turn here and join him. He's got his orders to stay in his zone and carry out his reconnaissance. You've made the blunder."

Jacoby's face was convulsed with wild anger. "Hide behind his tail!" he roared. "A fat chance!"

A shower of bullets ripped through the big leaves above us. Jacoby and I looked at each other steadily.

"I'll try," I said. "I'll go over. This trail——"

He said nothing and I took the pony from the waiting soldier. The map showed the two main trails close here. By riding hard along the cross trail I could meet Louie who had come on more slowly than we had. I galloped off, leaving Jacoby cursing after me. The little stallion was sturdy and willing, and I was lucky; I met no one on the trail. Some three quarters of an hour later I was looking into Louie's sullen face.

"No bunkie stuff!" he warned me. "Not a chance. Let that wise-guy take what's coming to him."

I tried to argue but he cut me short.

"He got himself into that mess trying to show me up. How hard he was. What a big soldier-man. Now if he wants help let him come over and beg for it. Come into my zone and march with me. I'm not disobeying orders to help that cheap skate out. And you'd better stay with me; if you go on over there and do make it, it's a court, sure as hell."

"You don't understand," I pleaded. "They're intrenching——"

He laughed.

"The hell I don't! Manuk sent a walking delegate over to see me. My outfit had nothing to do with it. I just had another habla with him back here a ways. He'd reported to the panglima and come back. I've got a clean slate and Allah's blessing. That old bird doesn't want another platoon to fight, you can be sure of that. So wiley old Manuk says I can-do—march back like a good little boy. That high ranking first lieutenant of yours will be fastening his precious silver bars on a pair of gold wings before long."

"You been drinking, Louie?"

"Hell, have I got to be drinking to have pleasant thoughts?"

"There are men there—a platoon of innocent men."

"Not so damned innocent. They like to fight, anyway. It's coming to all of us sooner or later. A slug in the guts."

UNDER the banter I saw that he was utterly cold; bitter. I reached into my shirt pocket and held something out to him in the palm of my hand. He was startled for a moment, but then the cold light came back into his eyes.

"It looks like a medal," he said.

"Yes," I said. "I had one of the Moro kids dive for it this morning. It cost me a peso."

"Well, it cost me my girl," Louie said, and he laughed loudly.

I pushed it into his hand. He recoiled from it as though it were a centipede. "Get out!" he said, fiercely.

The medal fell to the ground. A young soldier who had been standing nearby, bent and picked it up. Odd, but the politeness of that kid, as he smiled and handed the thing back to Louie, did what I don't believe anything else could have. For Louie loved his men. He could never be rough or ungracious with them the way so many Scout officers were. A deep red flamed in his face. He hastily slipped the medal in his breeches pocket. He thanked the little soldier and forced a smile for him.

"Damn you!" he said to me.

"You remember what that cavalry captain said. 'The fate of a man——' Once you get one of those things there's no going back. You're not your own man anymore. You're a damned hero in the eyes of the world. You can't have the pleasure of fear anymore."

He bared his teeth at me almost like a dog.

"Get the hell out of here!"

"I laughed and mounted up.

"Jacoby's fighting forward up the trail. They'll stop him at the hill. I'll tell him you're coming on behind."

And as I rode away I looked back over my shoulder. He was still glaring after me and he yelled, "You can both go to hell as far as I'm concerned." And then something else—probably an inspired curse—which the sound of my pony's drumming hoofs drowned out.

WHEN I reached Jacoby he had lost ten men and was cursing the rest forward towards the frowning slope that blocked the trail.

The whole thing was insane; and after one good look into Jacoby's face I realized that battle madness had him in its inexorable grip. He had gone too far to move back and save the command. The Moros were already in his rear and pressing. Only the fact that they were poorly armed had left him with the men he had. For after the fight at Bud Suliman a systematic search for arms had been made over the entire island, and most of the rifles had been taken. But spears and razor sharp barongs are worse than rifles at close quarters; and the Moros were closing in.

There was a small, weedy hillock some hundred yards ahead of us; it was really a lower spur of the main hill where the Moros had assembled in force. With a terrific charge we made it; and from its comparative vantage point we formed a ring of dripping bayonets. The Moros, realizing the cost of attack up that smooth slope, drew back to reorganize. Jacoby, wiping the sweat and blood from his haggard face, glared at me.

"Sent you back, eh!" he snarled.

"Oh, shut up!" I said. "Can't you let us even die in peace! You've got an unlovely voice, Jacoby."

He looked down at the ground morosely. Blood dripped slowly off his finger tips from his raw knuckles. He stared at the sticky gouts as though fascinated by their persistence. He shook his hand slightly, then looked up at me.

"He's not coming," he said. It was a statement and a question.

"No. I tried a shenanigan on him. He's sentimental, deep down. I dug up that medal and pulled a movie on him. Too thick I guess."

Jacoby began to curse me, slowly and distinctly.

"There might have been a chance—before that," he said. "When he heard the firing. But now——" His eyes flashed up as though a switch had snapped on behind them, lighting bright tiny arcs. "Well, now you've just reminded him of what he's got against me—clinched it!"

The men, on their knees, their bayonets thrust outward, began to fire.

"They're coming," Jacoby said. "Put the extra clip in your teeth—you'll fumble it from the belt."

I loosened the loaded pistol clips in my magazine pouch.

"Showing off before a woman got us in this fix," I said bitterly, staring up towards the larger hill where the Moros were forming in a packed mass.

"You saw him at Suliman. He even offered you a drink. Damned if I'd have him swanking in front of her with that thing on. You know he was drunk."

"He had exactly two drinks," I said. "I found out afterwards. Would you have done it, drunk or sober?"

He shot a hateful look at me. "You've seen me in action," he said. "I'm not a four-flusher."

"They come now, sir," the sergeant said quietly. I saw the Moros moving slowly towards us. The beginning of their chanting came to us across the softly waving cogon grass.

"O-e-o-oh-ai . . . bogi!"

THE handful of Illocano soldiers shouted answering taunts. They must have known their lives were numbered in minutes, yet their dark faces worked with hateful cunning, their eyes gleamed as they selected targets. They were like a football team leaning forward to meet a kick-off.

"Get a couple of men away on the pack horses," Jacoby said steadily. "They won't matter here and the word will get in faster."

None of the men wanted to go.

"To hell with them if they don't want revenge. Let 'em stay and get their throats cut."

The pack ammunition had been unloaded. Bandoleers lay about our feet,

the clips ripped from them. The men had stuffed their pockets and jammed them into their belts.

Jacoby blew his whistle.

"Fire at will! As fast as you can pull your bolts!"

The men took the words from his mouth and echoed them. Then a terrific uproar of firing broke out. Instead of some twenty men it seemed as if an entire company was engaged. The Moros, who for some reason had banded into one unit, screamed and came on. There must have been two hundred of them at least; but probably not fifty were armed with rifles. Their answering fire was erratic; but ours cut them down as though a broadside of chain shot was tearing through their ranks. But you can't stop a Moro when he advances on a planned objective. He has a single-track mind; and once it is accommodated to a fixed idea it knows of no changing. But by the same token, he is peculiarly susceptible to surprise. Take him from an unexpected direction and panic fills his soul.

LOUIE must have come on fast, because when his men broke cover they came from beyond the fork in the trail. From the high ground near where, the day before, we had reconnoitered the false cotta.

They screamed almost like the Moros themselves; and the wide intervals they took made them seem at least a company. They caught the attackers squarely on the flank; and their close-range fire tore awful gaps in the savage ranks.

Then you couldn't hold our men. They rushed out, despite Jacoby's whistle and wild cursing. What few Moros hadn't raced for the jungle were cut to pieces. And the wounded—when we got up with them it was like tearing hounds from a kill. But we had no whips and it couldn't be done.

Then the cutting of bamboos for litters—first aid bandages—the awful flies.

I was ready to lie down and be wholeheartedly sick by the time we marched into Asturias and heard the bugle blowing for Retreat.

The news had gone on ahead. You could see the soldiers leaning from the porch rails of the barracks and the white forms of officers on the walks asking each other excited questions. Little native boys ran wide-eyed along the street in front of our column yelling the news like our own newsboys with an extra out. *"Combate! mucho combate!"* The bright dresses of women on the steps of the officers' quarters.

We marched on in a tired column, the men at attention, trying to hold their sagging shoulders straight. They were very proud. Jacoby marched at the head, his eyes staring straight before him, blood clotted and dried on his hard, dark face. Without distance, Louie led his platoon in rear of ours.

The Major sent for us at once and the sergeants proudly marched the men to their barracks.

"I'll get a court for this," Jacoby said as we moved over towards the headquarters building. "I gave the order to the point and I made an ass of myself afterwards. I can't control my temper when I hate a man. I'm not fit to be a Scout officer. I should have swallowed my pride and gone over with him as you said."

I didn't like the man but I felt sorry for him. I knew that he was probably right. The Major had made it clear that the Moros were to be conciliated. And now they were up in arms again. Up in arms because two men loved his daughter.

"It's not that bad," I said. "They attacked us. And anyway, we're all in the same boat."

"Not Moulton," he said harshly. "He's got that message to prove it. And you were under me."

"If we stick together," I said, "they won't do anything."

I saw a look—a quick flash of hope come into Jacoby's eyes. He laid a hand on my arm. "That's decent of you," he said. "Yes, that way we would be all right."

I LOOKED back. Louie was plodding behind us. I knew he had deliberately hung back to avoid Jacoby. He had merely glared at me when I had started to walk with him. So I had gone ahead with my own lieutenant. I stopped.

"Louie," I said.

He didn't even look at me. Jacoby had slowed his steps. I knew how hard this must be for him; but it was his only chance. He had been in technical command, and Louie could damn him officially.

Louie came up to us.

"Listen, Louie. We can't unmake this thing. It was just a mistake of judgement, a bad break. We had to fight our way through and you heard the firing. You had come in, so you're absolved from blame. It's only Jacoby here; he's holding the sack because he was in command. Let's stick together. No sense of a court over this; it won't bring any of the others back."

He stood there staring straight ahead of him, looking neither at me nor at Jacoby. A little behind us, on the headquarters steps, an orderly made excited gestures. He tried to tell us the Major was waiting.

There was a long, dead silence.

I said, "Jacoby's sorry, Louie. He knows now you weren't drunk. He's sorry as hell."

Louie never looked at us. He just stared ahead.

Jacoby nodded his head a little.

"Yes, he said. "Sorry. And damned ashamed, Moulton."

Then Louie looked up, jerking his head a little. He looked at Jacoby. He lifted his hand; and for a brief instant I thought he was going to strike the other. Then I noticed how awful he looked—his eyes, red and bloodshot, sunk far back into his head. He held his right hand close to his left breast. His left arm hung stiff, unnaturally by his side. His burning eyes seemed literally to impel his whole body closer to Jacoby. His right hand, the fingers stiff and fumbling, pushed against his shirt pocket. As though with great labor he unflapped the pocket and drew out a dirty, folded paper. A message blank. He held it up close to Jacoby's eyes.

"Die of shame then," he said thickly. "There's my answer," and he strode by us and walked firmly up the headquarters steps.

WE STOOD before the commanding officer's desk, the three of us. A single dim electric bulb burned over it, and the flying ants snapped and beat about it. The building was unnaturally quiet and it came to me that never before had I been in it before at night. A gekko lizard was calling throatily outside; and then came the faint music from the band playing before the officers' club.

The Major, in starched whites, sat there looking up at us. We must have been an odd sight standing there before his impeccable person in our tattered and sweat-stained working clothes. I remember, there in that moment of silence, smelling the rank odor of smokeless powder. And only afterwards did I realize that it came from our sweating pistols.

The Major looked from one to the other of us, then his eyes fixed themselves gravely on Jacoby. He was the senior; and by the law of the army his was the piece to tell—and the blame to take. Or the credit.

"Casualties?" he said.

The gekko got in several hoarse croaks before Jacoby replied.

"Five killed, fifteen wounded, sir."

I noticed the knuckles whiten on the Major's clenched hands. He set his teeth together, hard.

"Awful!" he said. Then he looked from one of us to the other. "Any of you——?"

I knew Jacoby was badly torn in the side; I had bound him up. I looked at Louie. I could see the left arm better now. The sleeve was stiff with blood,

and it still hung down in that straight, unnatural way. Broken, of course.

Nobody said anything.

"The Major kept looking hard at me. There was a lot of blood on me; but most of it was from Jacoby.

"Lieutenant Jacoby, sir," I said in a high, strange voice. "A bad spear wound in the side and a bullet in the forearm."

"Just flesh wounds," Jacoby said.

I noticed Louie looking at him. The hard light in his eyes changed a little. I wondered if he were glad. I looked again at Jacoby, fresh, bright red blood was again running from his fingers. His face was chalk white. Then he was leaning a little against the desk.

The Major tapped on the desk. The silence went on.

"Can't any of you talk!" the Major said sharply.

THEN Elsie came in. She had a Spanish shawl over her shoulders . . . mostly black, with some deep red roses woven into it. It set off her thick gold hair. I gaped at her; not altogether because she was so breathlessly beautiful, but because she was here at all. Women never enter official conclaves or buildings in the army.

I saw by her eyes that she had heard about the fight.

I looked at Louie. He was in the middle, and Jacoby on the right of our little line, as was proper. So Jacoby was nearest to the door and to Elsie and I could watch them all.

"Elsie!" the Major said, outraged.

Elsie didn't even look at him. She looked at us. And as Jacoby fell forward over the desk, Elsie got to him first. The Major arose fussily.

"Orderly! Ambulance!" he shouted.

The ambulance must have been on the *qui vive* for our heralded coming, for never before had I heard of an army ambulance arriving at a scene of excitement short of an hour. Elsie held Jacoby's head against the Spanish shawl and further reddened it while we waited. The Major cursed softly, and smoked one cigarette after the other. Louie stood and looked out through the dark window.

I watched Elsie, as I helped her to ease Jacoby's inert body. I saw her look just once at Louie—a mute, steady look, her eyes very quiet. But he never even looked her way.

Then the Major said, "I'll take your report, Moulton. Both of you should be in the hospital."

Louie straightened up then and looked at the Major. I held my breath. Then I touched his arm. He winced and the Major noticed it.

"He's worse than Lieutenant Jacoby, sir," I said. "Light in the head. Arm smashed by a bullet. I can make the report."

Elsie was busy with Jacoby. I wanted her to hear, too. I wanted her to feel badly. But she was too far away, and she was crying rather loudly.

"I'm perfectly all right, sir," Louie said, and he shot me a hard look. "We joined forces on the way out and my point fired on some Moros at work. My standing orders to the men were to fire at working parties if they were suspicious—"

The Major started. He leaned forward scowling.

"The Moros scattered, we separated on our respective patrols, thinking that was all there'd be to it. They assembled and attacked Lieutenant Jacoby's platoon on the way back, near the same place, which proves we were right at first. They had started a *cotta* then. I came up near the end of the action and got them in the flank. That's all there was too it."

I looked over at Elsie. She had stopped crying as Louie started to speak and now she was watching him. The ambulance came up with a great to-do, and Elsie stood on the steps looking up as they lifted the litter with Jacoby into the ancient vehicle.

"Get in, too, Moulton," the Major said.

I helped Louie into the ambulance. Elsie tried to push me away.

"Louie!" she said. Her voice shot up, ending in an hysterical little whimper. She tried to get by me, climb up the steps of the thing.

Louie leaned against the side of the ambulance. A corps man held him so that he wouldn't be thrown about when the vehicle started off. Louie's head hung down; his chin was against his chest.

"Get away from him!" I said to Elsie. I pushed her back and the ambulance drove off.

The Major had called the adjutant in and I could hear him dictating the official report which by order had to be cabled to Manila at once.

". . . action this date . . . casualties . . . heroic conduct of officers and men engaged . . . entirely justified because of attitude of armed Moros in defiance of agreement all local native leaders. . . . Especially commend officer in command, First Lieutenant James Jacoby, Philippine Scouts. . . ."

I still had Elsie Blake by the arm.

"You heard that!" I said.

She stared at me dumbly.

"That means your boy-friend has missed a court. They'll give him a medal, likely; a Medal of Honor. By rights he ought to be. . . !"

I HAD worked myself up into a fine fury; and in the heat of it I told her the whole thing. She listened to me, her hands, one over the other flat against her breast. Then she began to cry a little.

"Oh cut that out! Go bawl on Jacoby!"

She stifled her sobs. She looked in to the open, lighted window where her father smoked furiously, still talking to the adjutant. He was saying something about the dirty garbage pails of the 60th Company—Louie's.

Then Elsie said, "He'll tell . . . Lieutenant Jacoby. When he comes to . . . and hears. I'm glad Louie did it."

"He won't need to. It's officially reported now. He's a hero. Louie made him a hero."

She looked up at me wistfully. I hated to have to hate her.

"It was harder—lots, wasn't it, than winning a Medal of Honor—to do that for him?"

"He did it for *you,* you little fool. Because he heard you were going to marry Jacoby and he saw it was true when you bawled over him in there."

"I'm not going to—why, who said that?"

"Oh, hell!" I said. "Jacoby mouthed to Fletcher."

She stared at me. Her eyes seemed honestly puzzled. The she said, "He asked me last night. His face was so cut and he felt so badly because it happened in front of me—well, I kissed him. I was awfully sorry for him. But I didn't tell him that."

"He thought so anyway. Well, now you can tell him, then. Go on over to the hospital and tell him."

She took my arm and started to move—hurrying.

"Yes," she said. "I'll go and tell him—tell Louie. I love Louie, Peck, and I know he loves me."

I began to laugh loudly then; and I realized that I was weak—loss of blood and no food all day.

"What I need is a great big whisky and Tansan," I said. "And you're as nutty as I am, Elsie. You don't love Louie; your damned vanity, your conceit is aroused. It's romantic because he did all this for you . . . eh, baby-face?"

She stopped in the wide shell road. Her big eyes were grave as they searched my face.

"No, Peck," she said. "It's something bigger than that—bigger than I could be to him. It's—what was it the General's aide said that night?"

My head was whirling; and that sentence came back to me and whirled with it.

"Elsie, darling, you've guessed it. And what that guy said was this, right from Allah himself: 'The fate of a man is bound round his neck!'—or words to that effect."

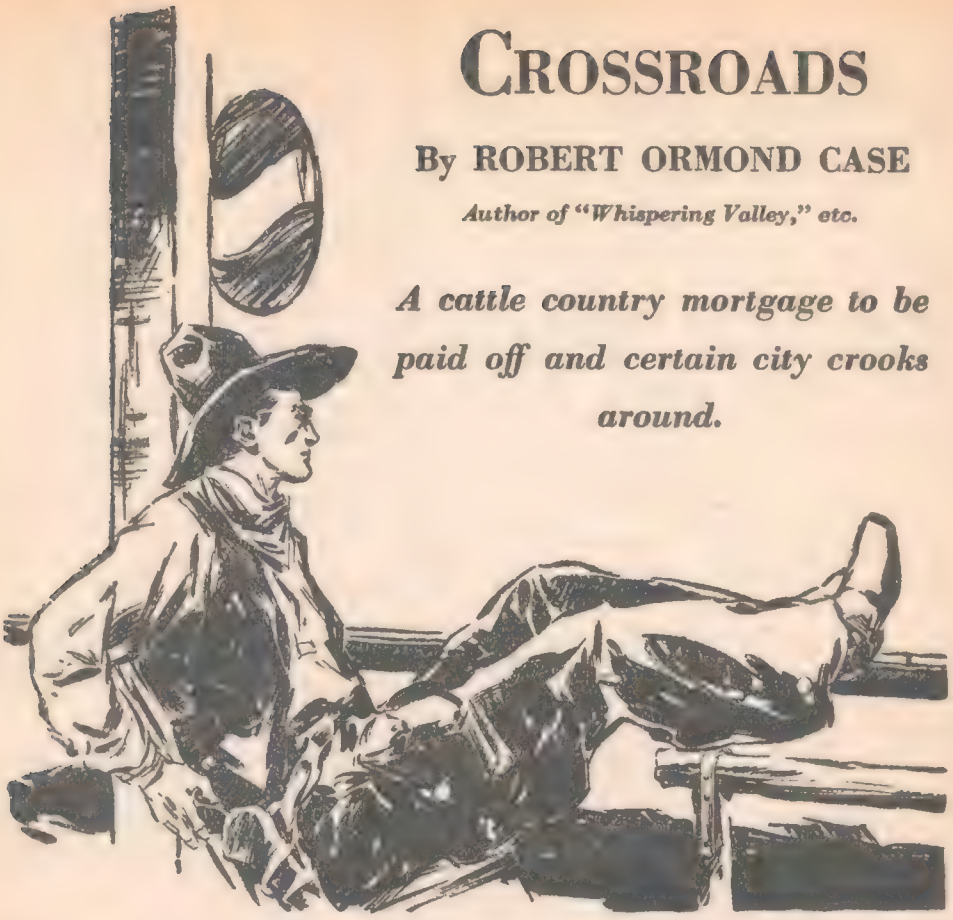
"And Allah's right," Elsie said softly.

CROSSROADS

By ROBERT ORMOND CASE

Author of "Whispering Valley," etc.

A cattle country mortgage to be paid off and certain city crooks around.



WINDY DELONG slouched up the Main Street of Condon, sweat-stained and gray with dust. His lean shoulders sagged a little, and much daylight showed between his capable knees. Yet his weariness, it was plain even to the casual eye, was solely of the flesh. Triumph strode with him shoulder to shoulder. His mustache bristled with satisfaction, his sinister eye glittered tolerantly upon friend and foe alike and his leathery cheek bulged with an enormous chew.

Not only a good day's work, but a year of worry was drawing to a close. The cattle were all loaded. The weighing in and checking of figures was completed. The DeLong herd of prime stuff—all of seventy-two head—was now the property of the packing trust. In lieu thereof, in the breast pocket of his hickory shirt, reposed a draft drawn on the First National Bank of Condon in the amount of three thousand and two dollars.

"That there two bucks, pardner," Windy had informed the cattle buyer when the deal was done, "is pure gravy. The action I'll get on them two iron men will shorely make history. Long after you an' I are forgotten, folks'll shake their heads an' say, 'Doggone, it was pitiful. A whole year's profits, an' he scattered it along the boolevard like confetti. A dollar here an' a dollar there. Gents an' others, that was a *bust!*"

This, of course, was gentle sarcasm aimed at the alleged profits in the beef business. Of soaring satisfaction to Windy was the knowledge that the meager herd had brought enough on the falling market to lay low a ghost that had haunted his dreams: a certain mortgage which to-

taled, with accrued interest, an exact three thousand.

The fact that the ranch was now denuded of all livestock except breeders and saddle-string, that a lean winter lay ahead, did not detract in the least from his triumph. Rocky days, lonely years were known of old. With the mortgage paid he would, in the parlance of the cow country, be in the clear; he would have the world by the tail; he would be prepared anew to yodel down life's highway, glory-bound.

Twilight had fallen upon the metropolis of the high desert, the season being late fall; and it was as though flaring street-lights leaped boldly into life to light his way. The evening was still young, but already a carnival note was in the air. The pavement resounded to the tramp of marching feet. Shreds of music rode down with the wind, shouts and laughter, bursts of song. The drum of hoof beats came from the open range; and from far out beneath the strengthening stars, staccato shots and wild whoops muted by distance were additional proof that the prodigal Saturday night army was closing in.

ALL this was in tune with Windy's mood. It warmed his heart, like old wine. It reaffirmed and magnified the value of the slip of paper reposing in the breast pocket of his hickory shirt. Here was a region whose ways he knew, peopled by men who spoke a language he understood. A hard-bitten environment, a social scheme, a primitive parade into which he fitted as easily and naturally as a dust laden duck winging down to rest in a crystal pool.

He responded in kind to the profane greetings unloosed upon him by passing horsemen. He parried the grinning insults hurled by loungers on battle-scarred benches, sorrowfully evaded the almost tearful insistence of thirsty ones beckoning him from palaces of refreshment that lined the "main drag." Business came first. The bank, open for business of a Saturday night until eight o'clock, would close in five minutes.

He strode past the soaring columns and so into the brilliantly-lighted den of the money-changers. The lobby was crowded with last minute customers. A sandy-haired, thin-lipped person—a newly-acquired assistant in a feed barn up the street—fell in behind him; and behind this one a bank employee closed the door.

The cashier, a grizzled ex-cattleman who had known Windy in earlier and more lurid decades on the high desert, was in the cage. He smoothed out the draft, nodding.

"Just place your John Henry on this," said he, "An' I'll put it out of harm's way. Funny you don't make out your own deposit slips."

"You're a mite previous," retorted Windy. "Here's one piece of change this bloated institootion don't get its clutches on. Shell out three hundred tenspots, plus two round, shiny simoleons, an' no back talk."

THE cashier pursed his lips in a silent whistle. "I'm no hand to take a disordered interest in world affairs," said he. "But how do you aim to scatter this amount of unearned increment?"

"I'll tell you how," said Windy. "It's one of them delightful chores. Two hours from now, at a loan shark's office up the street, I'm meeting up with my old pal, Bull Morgan. You know what a friendly an' sociable critter he is. If that overstuffed macaroon seen me strugglin' beyond my depth, he'd heave me an anchor an' call it a rescue. If I was handcuffed an' shackled, he'd sneak up behind me an' kick me in the face. If——"

"Sure, sure," said the cashier, nodding. He lowered his voice. "I get you, old son. Morgan figures to crowd you off your quarter an' off the range. He was making his brags around town this afternoon. You're going to checkmate him by paying on the dot. But why cash? Wait

——" He motioned Windy aside with a meaning look. "We'll take care of this lad first. Then we'll figure it."

Windy stepped aside. The sandy haired individual presented a small check, which was cashed. He grunted a good night to both and passed forth into the street.

"Point is," said the banker, closing the door, "that's too much currency to be carrying on your person. Best leave me write you a cashier's check. Yes? No?"

"No," said Windy, his mustache bristling. "Morgan specified cash an' cash he'll get. An' why ten-spots? I aim to count 'em out one by one. Like pearls, you savvy. An' him bitin' nails all the while as he sees me gettin' closer to the total."

The other shook his head, laid three sheafs of new currency on the counter, placed two silver dollars upon the stack and thrust all toward Windy.

"I'm telling you," he warned; "it's bad business. Time was when a gent could carry his cash in a bucket in this man's town. Yeah, a blind man, at that. But not any more. Getting civilized, I reckon."

"Tut, tut," said Windy. "You an' I have seen more chicken feed than this change hands in one bet in the palmy days. I'd ought to be able to ride herd on it for a couple hours without bustin' out in a nervous rash." He thrust the currency into the inside pocket of his coat, slid the silver into his jeans and turned away. "See you later, ol' son."

WINDY had occasion to remember this careless speech. It was recalled to him, in fact, within ten minutes after he had left the cashier's presence.

From the gloom of an alley, hard by the brilliantly-lighted bank entrance, a shadow emerged and a timid hand plucked furtively at his sleeve.

"A dime, mister," a husky voice entreated. "For a cup of Java. I ain't eaten since yesterday morning. Honest, mister——"

Windy paused, thumbs hooked in his belt, and fixed the panhandler with a glittering eye. He was a grimy-faced youth, pallid and unshaved. Slender fingers clutched his frayed coat collar together against the chill night wind rolling in from the open country. He was a sorry spectacle indeed to Windy's jaundiced gaze; a misfit, weakling figure alien to the robust range.

Yet there was something about him that stilled the ready retort for which the hard-bitten cattleman was famous. The youth's gaze, at odds with his shrinking physique, was unwavering. In it was a nameless and indefinable wistfulness, as of a lonely, disreputable mongrel peering questioningly into a void, that touched Windy's heart. Because he himself, on occasion, had explored spiritual barrens, known hunger, weariness and defeat, his hand slid down unconsciously into his jeans.

"Son," said he, "life's full of mysteries. It ain't in me to inquire into how you got this way, nor how come you picked me out of the hoy polloy as a perambulatin' Christmas tree. Who am I to turn a deaf ear to a hungry lad a long ways from home? Don't you kid yoreself with no cup of Java, pardner. Lay holt on this, an' eat hearty."

He placed one of his silver dollars in the outstretched palm. The result touched his heart anew. The youth peered at the huge coin unbelievingly, blinked up at Windy. His thin shoulders sagged a little. His knees crumpled and he fell down and back into the shadow.

Windy stooped over him and raised him up. The youth's momentary weakness passed. He stood on spraddled legs, swaying.

"Cripes!" he breathed, huskily. "A whole buck. That's more coin than I've seen in a month. Mister, much obliged."

Now Windy, in raising the other to his feet, had shifted his position. His back was to the alley, his face toward the street.

Thus the youth was in silhouette against the farther lights; and Windy saw him stiffen suddenly. His teeth clicked upon a startled intake of breath. At the same instant, in the small of Windy's back, the

muzzle of a weapon bored with a cold, hard pressure.

"Hold it," whispered an even voice in his ear. "Not a word, fellow. Raise 'em slowly. Higher. . . . Nail that bum."

ANOTHER figure appeared silently before Windy. He drew closer crouching, as the latter raised his arms; pressed a blunt-nosed automatic against his chest. The panhandler, disregarded, shrank around the corner into the street and was gone.

"Never mind the bum. This is the egg we're after." The man facing Windy had his cap pulled low, his coat collar turned up. His voice was chill and menacing. "Stay put, you! One funny move and you're sunk. Let's have that dough——"

Windy was unarmed. Out of respect to city ordinance, he had left his gun in his saddlebag. He knew instinctively that here were criminals of a caliber foreign to the range; that his chances of survival, should he make the slightest gesture of resistance, was one in hundreds.

Yet, when the thug before him threw back his coat, laid hold on the package in the inside pocket and transferred it with a swift motion to his own, he took that chance. The mortgage money, in his scheme of things, was life itself.

He whirled in a lightning like movement, simultaneously striking down each gun arm. The roar of both weapons reechoed in the alley. He felled the assailant on his right with a back-hand, lashing blow. This one bore his treasure; and he leaped upon him, intent on dragging him forth into the glare of the street.

Whereupon a terrific blow, delivered upon the back of his head, sent him crashing into oblivion.

AN HOUR and forty-five minutes later—at a quarter to ten, to be exact—Windy sat slumped in a rawhide-backed chair uptilted against the wall at Flannigan's. His lean shoulders were hunched. His hawk-like features were dark and forbidding. His teeth were clamped morosely on an enormous chew.

The "DeLong Hold-up" was now history. Its echoes had rolled across the robust metropolis like a tidal wave. The marshal and two-score hastily-impressed deputies, plus additional forces from the sheriff's office, had combed the town. All roads leading to the open country had been guarded. All suspects had been rounded up and checked off. But the results had been nil. The unknown thugs had disappeared as mysteriously as they had come.

Windy, who had bayed at the forefront of the slavering pack, was now utterly dispirited. The chase was still going forward. He had withdrawn from it, as one withdraws in spirit from the bustle and confusion of life, to face the enormity of the jackpot that had overwhelmed him.

Though Flannigan's was crowded at the moment, he sat alone with his thoughts. Friends and enemies alike kept at a distance. Not innate delicacy alone caused them to respect his grief. It was also a matter of prudence; for it was plain that Windy, groping among spiritual ruins, was loaded for bear and no grizzlies in sight.

As he sat thus, his battered sombrero

pulled low, a figure that was furtive and shrinking sidled through the crowd. A jaundiced gleam kindled in Windy's eye as the youthful panhandler approached directly to him, drew up a chair and seated himself diffidently at his side.

FROM all about in the big room, curious faces were turned toward them and quivering ears were alert. It was known that Windy's generous gesture in the alley beside the bank had immediately preceded the hold-up. The shrinking youth himself had been questioned concerning the desperadoes. He had been able to add nothing to Windy's description, having obviously been beside himself with terror.

It was confidently expected now that Windy, in his present mood, would turn upon the youth and make strenuous effort to tear him limb from limb. Such a pleasant diversion did indeed occur to Windy; but he put the profitless thought from him. He merely pulled his sombrero lower over his eyes, shifted his quid to the other cheek and scowled in half-hearted fashion.

Because the panhandler's voice was husky and low-pitched, and Windy's responses came as a growling undertone, even the most curious of the distant spectators caught no part of the interchange.

"Mr. DeLong," said the boy—and he was little more than a boy—"back there in the alley, when you gimme that ducat, you also handed me some kind words. That fit I threw was just a gag, but it hit me just the same. Since the hold-up I've heard plenty. You ain't a stuffed shirt in this village. You ain't a plutocrat. You're the real McCoy. What I mean——" he twisted his hands, as though the unaccustomed words came hard—"a guy you can tie to."

"Yeah?" said Windy, apathetically. "Nice night, ain't it?"

"I've heard about the things you've done out here in the sticks," continued the youth. "Folks swear by you. The real folks. I seen that big tub, Morgan. His eyes are too close together. He figures this hold-up was a break, a guy tells me. He's going to hold you to that mortgage. He's rubbing you out. I know just how you feel."

"Bah!" said Windy, rousing. "You don't know nothin'. What you gibberin' about, son? You never earned an honest dollar in yore life. The only time you ever sweat was when yore knees was shakin'. The only things you've learned about life is what you picked up in the blasted sewers an' cellars of society. What lonely trails have you blazed? What do you know about blizzards out in the bad lands an' dust storms in the desert? How could you come within shoutin' distance of what it means to get a foothold in the Promised Land—after them barren years in the waste places—an' see it slippin' away? What's it in yore twisted an' penny-sneakin' life if a long-whiskered pelican like me comes smack up to a crossroads an' finds himself crossin' into the desert again just like he come—busted, friendless an' alone? Yeah, only he ain't young an' hard-boiled no more, but is rickety, grown old——"

HE RELAXED, his momentary eloquence fading. He waved his hand in a listless gesture. "What of it? Roll yore hoop elsewhere, son. Yore brainless chatter gripes me."

But the other did not depart. Looking at him, Windy noted with mild contempt that his pinched face glistened with perspiration and that his hands were gripped in a futile effort to keep them from shaking.

"I get you," said the boy in a low voice. "What I mean, I understand your talk. Wisht I could trail with a guy like you. Those blizzards and dust storms wouldn't stop me. I'd eat 'em raw. Maybe I could get to be real folks, too. But it's too late now. . . . Look, Mr. DeLong. What I came to tell you was this. Back of the first row of horses at the red feed barn,

there's a pile of baled hay. Three from the right, two up, in the crack between the bales, you'll find your dough."

Windy eyed him fixedly, his lean jaw clamped on his chew.

"What you mean, son?"

"I seen you loading cows," said the boy. "I followed you to the bank. I watched through the window while you put the dough away. I tore a green wrapping paper into pieces and made a package the same size and waited in the alley. I'm what the grafters call a dip. And a good one. When those yeggs showed up, I had the dough and the phoney roll was in your pocket."

Windy sat for a moment, stunned.

"You're hard," whispered the boy. "Don't look surprised. Sit tight for a minute more. Those gorillas won't figure I've caved like this. But they might."

In the shadow of his sombrero, Windy's gaze roved about the big room; then returned to the boy.

"You're ravin', son. Where are these gun-throwers? They ain't a man here but what I know by sight."

"Who's that guy leaning against the wall?" The boy's whisper came from the corner of his mouth. "Easy now. . . . Over at the right."

"That sandy-haired lad? I know him. He's an assistant chambermaid down to Lem's feed barn. Been here over a month."

"It was about a month ago," said the boy, "that he flew the coop at 'Frisco. He's Lefty Krupp. From DeVanno's mob. Who's that long guy—over here—watching the stud game?"

"Slim Enders," said Windy. "Dishwasher at Louie's." His lips pursed in a silent whistle. "Son of a gun! He come here——"

THE boy nodded. "About a month ago. He's Denver Tony, the rod—for the big shot himself. Down on the Bay. Those gorillas won't stop at nothin'. I didn't know they were hiding out here. They figure I hi-jacked a roll they'd been laying for for days. They'll take chances on the chair to rub me out. Crowds won't stop 'em. . . . Don't look at Lefty, mister. He's—he's looking at the clock. They gave me fifteen minutes to come across. I was sunk either way. They'd rub me out after they got the dough. . . . So I c-came here first." His teeth were chattering. "You were entitled to a break. Real folks. . . . You—you better go now."

Windy did not go. For the space of five full seconds he sat, meditatively digesting what he had heard. Then, though his leathery cheek was already bulging, he drew forth his plug and tore off another chew. In returning the weed to his pocket, it dropped to the floor. He stooped to retrieve it; and in the same motion raised up the cuff of his jeans and drew forth from his boot a long-barreled, single action forty-four Colt.

This formidable weapon he drew up casually and held in the shadow of his thigh.

"Cached it there when I quit sleuthin'," he whispered. Gunmen, eh?"

"Don't do it," pleaded the youth, his eyes bulging. "You ain't got a chance, mister. Those gorillas——"

"Stay put," warned Windy, softly. "Don't wiggle an eyebrow an' you'll have a grandstand view of how folks in a peace-lovin' community get action when their hackles are ra'red up. Flannigan!" He raised his voice above the genial din. "Two large-size sasp'rellas! For two thirsty gents!"

Many grinning faces were turned in their direction. The loud order marked, it was obvious to all, a decided upward

trend in the spirits of that unfortunate wolf, DeLong. Only the faces of the two outlaws were fixed and unsmiling.

The burly proprietor of the palace of refreshment bore down upon them, tray in hand. His single eye beamed upon Windy. What nameless signal passed between them escaped the terrified youth; but Flannigan bent lower, arranging the glasses on an adjacent chair, and Windy whispered in his ear.

Flannigan departed, beaming still. Immediately thereafter one of his hirelings, a downright person known locally as "Bouncer" McShane, sallied forth with a tray to the battlers at the stud table.

"On the house," he announced cryptically, passing the glasses around.

This proceeding aroused no comment. More unusual was the fact that Mr. McShane, turning himself about casually, enfolded Slim Enders in an embrace that pinioned his arms as in bands of steel. At the same moment, Windy's weapon roared deafeningly in the big room.

A sandy-haired person close by the opposite wall spun twice around and fell, his gun arm shattered. His weapon, a blunt-nose automatic half drawn from his pocket, fell clattering to the floor.

AN' THAT'S that," said Windy, as he stepped down from the loan shark's office with the canceled mortgage in his hand. He yawned luxuriously, his mustache bristling into the semblance of a ferocious snarl. He fixed the youth beside him with a glittering eye. "Now what? What ails you mostly?"

"I was just thinking——" began the youth.

"It's a haywire pastime," said Windy. "It don't get you nowhere. 'Less you watch it, it's a habit that grows on a man. But whilst we're on the subject, just what was you thinkin' about that gives you the bleary-eyed heeby-jeebies thisaway?"

"It ain't right, Mr. DeLong," said the other. "What I mean, this business of putting me on your payroll and all that. You can't take a guy like me——"

"Bah!" said Windy, scowling. He produced his plug of tobacco and sank his teeth viciously into the weed. "You're just the kind of a lad to insist on his privileges regardless. Have I got to come right out an' tell you that I'm in yore debt plenty? Has a shy an' bashful gent like me got to break down an' confess that the ol' ranch gets kind of lonesome once in a while, that a lobo my age hankers to have a lad around to cuss at an' yarn at an' help raise up to be a stalwart, upstandin' citizen of which the cow country'll be proud? Have I got to point out that both of us has just turned our backs on a crossroads of life, an' enter into a profitless debate concernin' which one helped the other the most? Be danged if I do. If I was a talkative gent, now. . . . Son, where's that dollar I gave you a while back?"

"Here," said the youth, fumbling hastily in his jeans.

"Fork it over," said Windy. "It just comes to me that in all this hullabaloo I didn't get to eat. We'll just slide down to Louie's. We got to have sustenance for the trip to the ranch. It's a long haul. They ain't nobody goin' to say I started my new hand out hungry. Son, what you shakin' for? Cold?"

"No." The boy's voice was husky. "I just wanted to tell you, Mr. DeLong——"

"Tut, tut," said Windy, his mustache bristling. "We'll begin with hot soup. Then a steak as big as yore hat. Coffee that would float a battleship. Eh, cowboy? . . . Let's go. Nice night, ain't it?"

The boy made no reply. It was plain that none was expected. He merely fell in at Windy's heels as the latter pushed through the milling crowds, bound for Louie's and new horizons.

Part II

Red Fires of Peril

By LEONARD R. GRIBBLE

WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE

FOR weeks Scotland Yard and all the London police had been looking for the stolen Marsden rubies, and when Detective Inspector Slade caught Patterson Gunter, the American crook, trying to sell them to Li Fang, the Chinese fence, in a secret den on the Thames riverfront, it looked as if the case were solved. But when the supposed rubies proved to be mere paste imitations which Gunter was trying to work off on the Chinaman, the case had to be reopened again. Believing that Gunter and Li Fang might know more about the real jewels than they had told, the inspector decided to let them go and then secretly watch them, even though Li Fang had already sworn deadly vengeance against the American who had tried to swindle him.

Then Scotland Yard was startled by the discovery of the body of Sir Dudley Marsden himself, owner of the rubies, killed apparently by caustic vitriol thrown over his head and face, horribly disfiguring it. But an autopsy showed also that a bullet had been fired through the man's head, either before or after death.

The body had been found in a slovenly alleyway called Pett's court, but Inspector Slade proved to his own satisfaction that it had been thrown over the wall from the house beyond, and the murder had not been committed in the street.

Two other things Slade found: one, a gold Charles II guinea evidently lost off a watch-chain at the place where the body was found; and two, a freshly painted lamp-post close by from which green paint had been smeared by some stranger fleeing in a hurry.

Following another clue, Inspector Slade found that Sir Dudley, who had been in

The crimson trail of the stolen Marsden rubies leads to the letters of the mysterious "black hawk."

the British Foreign Service, had been receiving mysterious letters from a man named Fedor Palinsky, who lived in the same hotel as Gunter, the American crook. And then, most astounding of all, the detective found that in his trailing he himself was being secretly trailed by none other than Reginald Wentley, the fiancé of Sir Dudley Marsden's only daughter, Daphne.

Chapter VII

PALINSKY SMILES—AND SWEARS

WHY was Reginald Wentley spying, in disguise, upon the detectives who were working on the Marsden case? That was what Inspector Slade wanted to know—and what he intended to find out, if he had to devote some of his own valuable time to shadowing that rising young member of the Diplomatic Service personally. But first there was Palinsky, the writer of the mysterious letter, to be investigated.

Finding Palinsky was easy enough. The San Remo, where he lived, was one of those small residential hotels to be found in South London, and he was living there under his own name. The attendant who took Slade's request disappeared for a few moments and then returned with the information that Mr. Palinsky would see the gentleman immediately in his own sitting room. As the inspector stepped through the door indicated by the attendant, he was surprised by a single loud monosyllable.

"So!"

The detective stopped in his stride and faced half around.

A man was standing by the left bay window, hands in pockets, and regarding him with an amused expression. His first glance told Slade that the man was not English, although there was nothing decidedly un-English about him. The second that he was a man out of the usual run. The name "Palinsky" suggested a Pole or a Russian. The man leaning against the window ledge might easily have been either.

"So!" He repeated the monosyllable without changing his position. "And to whom have I the honor to express my thanks for this unexpected pleasure?"

As he held out his card Slade watched his man with narrowed eyes. No movement of a single muscle escaped the vigilant detective. The other's attitude was self-possessed, his manner suave, and the man had unquestionably a certain element of personal magnetism in his make-up. He was, Slade judged, one of a certain class of men who appeal strongly to a similar class of women.

His smile broadened as he glanced lazily at the detective's card, and for the fleetest of moments he showed a fine set of even white teeth, unstained by nicotine.

"A pleasure, Inspector Slade," he smiled. "You have come, I presume, to ask a question—or questions. Is that not so, Inspector?"

"I have, Mr.—Palinksy?"

Slade's tone conveyed the question. The other nodded agreeably.

"Yes, Inspector, Fedor Palinsky."

For half a minute each man regarded the other from under leveled brows. Slade came to a rapid decision.

"I'm going to speak bluntly, Mr. Palinsky—very bluntly."

"Good!" exclaimed the man by the window. "It is the best, always. Believe me!"

Again the glances of the two were fixed.

"Well, then, Mr. Palinsky, where are the Marsden rubies?"

Not a muscle of the other's face relaxed. He smiled as pleasantly as before, the mocking light in his eyes not changing. His lips then parted.

"I only wish to high heaven I knew, Inspector! I shouldn't be here if I did!"

So far as Slade could judge he was sincere. The detective's eyes never faltered. They held the other's as he put his next question.

"Who, then, killed Sir Dudley Marsden?"

Again the slim, almost boyish shoulders rose and fell in an expressive gesture. The smile still lined the thin, hard mouth.

"That, Inspector, I can only guess."

SLADE had an uncomfortable feeling of pitting his wits against a brick wall. Not a single mannerism of the other's was overdone. Yet the detective knew very well that Palinsky was acting—superbly, too.

"And that guess?" Slade insisted.

"Is only a guess, I assure you most heartily, Inspector, I know no more than yourself who killed—murdered—Sir Dudley Marsden."

Slade waited, taking fresh stock of the other, then asked on a grim, suggestive note:

"How do you happen to know, Mr. Palinksy, that Sir Dudley Marsden was murdered?"

For the first time since Slade's entry into the room the eyes of the other dropped. He crossed to a small side table and picked up a newspaper. Without any comment he handed it to Slade.

Then, as the detective took it in silence: "That's one reason."

Slade stared. The paper was the *Morning Standard,* and the whole of the second column consisted of a report on the mysterious incidents surrounding the murder of Sir Dudley Marsden, the well-known diplomat.

He handed the paper back to Palinsky.

"Thanks. Very interesting. Professionally, I mean. However, I rather gather that that is not your only reason?"

"It will suffice?"

Once more Slade was aware of that mocking note, hidden in the silk-smooth tones.

"I'll be candid, Mr. Palinsky. It won't. Not until you've told me what you hope to gain by employing Mrs. Welch of 17 Palace Street, Lambeth, in the capacity of general agent."

Palinsky's eyelids flickered as he shot the other a savage glance.

"So you know that!" He breathed hard.

"Yes. And while we're about it, I'd like to ask you also what *this* symbolizes."

The detective drew from his notebook a piece of tracing paper on which was sketched a strange design. A bird, resembling in line and form an eagle, pecking at a grinning, empty skull; the bird's wings were poised for flight. Slade had traced the design the night before from the envelope the old woman had given him to give to Palinsky, the one addressed to 17 Palace Street. He had also found the same design in place of a signature on the sheet of paper contained in the envelope, a piece of paper on which were typewritten three or four lines running right across the page.

Palinsky took the piece of paper in a steady hand. As his glance fell on the design the detective saw that his fingers trembled slightly. For a moment he said nothing.

Slade held out his hand. It looked as though Palinsky were about to refuse to give back the piece of tracing paper, but, overcoming first impulses, he handed it back with little grace. Slade replaced it in his notebook.

"Well, Mr. Palinsky, what does it mean, please?"

Palinksy stared back, his eyes bulging slightly, the line of his jaw not so square as a few moments before.

"Are you a fool, man?" he hissed between clenched teeth.

Slade fingered his chin meditatively.

"That is rather beside the point. And I'd much prefer that we keep to the point. I'm asking a question."

Under such treatment the other's bold front crumbled a little more, but he made a wild effort to collect himself. He literally flung his next words at Slade's head.

"It means"—grimly—"that I'm an agent. And that's as far as concerns me. Or you, for that matter!"

Slade was skeptical.

"An agent who employs agents? Learning the wrinkles, I suppose? Quite a novel idea."

"As you please." Palinsky shook his shoulders.

Slade followed up.

"You'll be telling me next you're employed by other agents. And so we complete the circle." It was a feint on Slade's part, but it was partially successful.

"If I did," the other flung back, caution forgotten, "the chances are that I should be telling the truth!' He took a couple of steps nearer, stung, eyes half closed. "Mr. Inspector, let me tell you something. "You're either God's own idea of a blind fool, or else you're my idea of a dangerous one! I don't know which is worse—for you!"

THERE was a cold, rasping ring in the words that touched the iron in Slade. The words were spoken in earnest, deadly earnest.

The detective, more wary than ever, gave way strategically. But he did not flinch. Palinsky came on apace.

"You've drawn trumps this round—yes. Next time *I* deal, and you won't get dealt the same suit. D'you hear? Not when I'm dealing! No, Mr. Inspector!"

He paused, took another step forward, and drew his feet together, toes level. He went on.

"You're bluffing, one way or the other. I'm not sure which. You either know a damned sight more than is good for your physical health, or else you're just wasting

your time. I mean it! I won't threaten—it's not gentlemanly. So let that pass. But I'll *warn* you. Oh, yes! I'll give you ample warning. Because you don't know what you're tampering with. Get me? Leave well alone when it *is* well. Cut it!

There's no need to run. Walk. But walk backward! See? You'll find it safer!"

His features had changed as he spoke. The mask was off. Slade realized he was at the closest grips he had been with the man. Yet the Englishman was the last person in the world to be browbeaten into retreat by words.

"I wonder," he said softly, musingly.

He stood feet well planted apart, hands in pockets, head inclined slightly to one side.

"Well, don't!" spat the other. "Wondering ain't safe, either, for you! You're up against something too big for you—too big for the powers you represent! You're up against something which will crush you with no mercy if you get in its way. Which will crush anything that gets in its way! Which would crush me—if I blundered!"

Slade could see the pulsing of the skin covering the man's temples. For a brief instant Palinsky's face showed haggard and white under his fringe of sleek black hair. His body seemed veritably to shrink into its well-fitting clothes.

"That something crushed Sir Dudley Marsden?"

Palinsky hesitated, momentarily at a loss.

"I believe so!"

"Because he pitted himself against it?"

"Good God, no! Because he was fool enough to stand in its way, to try to—— But there!" He spread his hands.

"It's hardly clear"—dryly.

"But the lesson is! Don't do likewise!"

"Justice cannot temporize with crime, Mr. Palinsky. Sir Dudley Marsden was murdered. Justice demands the handing over of the man who murdered him—whoever he is. Furthermore, Sir Dudley Marsden was——"

Palinsky interrupted with a nasty little jarring laugh.

"You'll bluff yourself one day, Inspector. In fact, I'm not altogether sure you're not doing it now. If you want to know what this Sir Dudley Marsden was, he was a backslider, a common swindler ——"

"Foolish words, Mr. Palinsky."

The other snorted.

"In a sense, I admit. They describe a fool!"

Both men had moved round in a half circle. Slade stood with his back to the door through which he had entered the room, and the other stood by the right bay window.

"You seem to forget, Mr. Palinsky, that Sir Dudley Marsden's rubies were stolen three weeks ago."

The other twisted his mouth into something between a sneer and a yawn.

"I don't. But we don't mean the same thing when we say they were *stolen*."

AGAIN Slade had the sensation of pitting his wits against a brick wall. He seemed to be groping for light all the time, and finding only bewildering glimmers. It was not a pleasant sensation. It was decidedly the reverse.

"They were stolen from his safe in Cadogan Square. That is what I mean."

Palinksy laughed on a low, failing note, contemptuously.

"I know you do. But you're wrong."

Slade paused, puzzled.

"Yet you admit they were stolen?"

"I do. And that's what's caused all this hell of a fuss. But they weren't stolen from Cadogan Square!"

"Where, then?"

Slade was prepared for a lie. He got worse.

"Oh, Mr. Inspector, how could you—really!"

The Yard man ground his teeth. His eyes flashed brightly.

"I'll ask you one more question, and then I'll be going."

Palinsky moaned mockingly. He was fast recovering his former assured self.

"And what is that?"

Out flashed the question, giving the other no chance to prepare.

"What are your relations with Gunter?"

The man never flinched. At once came his reply, unhurried, still mocking faintly.

"You're candid, Inspector. It is almost a sin to disappoint you. Only, regrettably, I don't know the gentleman. Or is it a lady?"

Was he lying, or, at least, bluffing? Slade couldn't be sure.

"I'll leave that to your fertile imagination, Mr. Palinsky. And say good-bye for the present!"

He had half turned to the door, not wholly taking his eyes off the other. Before his hand reached the handle, however, the door opened slowly from the outside, revealing a woman standing there—a woman of a type.

Pretty, almost beautiful in the modern conception of slim line, she stood there, one hand on hip, the other toying with a gilt-tipped cigarette. Her eyes were luminous and bold, bold as the carefully lined carmine lips. An unbuttoned moleskin coat hung from her two shapely shoulders, revealing the delicate sheen of pale green silk beneath.

As Slade glanced at her she was in the act of exhaling luxuriously through her dainty nostrils another aromatic cloud. The detective's glance travelled back to Palinsky, then once more to the woman. He nodded to her familiarly.

"Doing yourself well these days, Sadie!"

The woman paused in the act of raising her cigarette to her lips, and threw Slade a keen, searching glance. She started. A flick of two beringed fingers sent the cigarette curling in a thin trail of smoke into the well-polished grate.

"Well, I'll be—sugared! Old friend Slade—in the giddy flesh! Lordy strike me happy hooray!"

Slade just grinned.

"Come to see Mr. Palinsky, Sadie," he went on cheerfully. Then, suddenly changing both tactics and tone: "I thought you were trying to run straight these days. Ever since that Heppelthwaite affair."

"What's that?" She took him up smartly, flinging herself round and facing him. "Who says I'm not running straight?"

"No one. I said I thought you were."

Her answering smile was half pleasant, half something else.

"Tony"—she came closer, her eyes plaintive—"be a good sort, and cut the mystics. You and I are old friends, aren't we? Well, then! Now, straight! What are you doing here?"

She looked him straight in the eyes.

"I'm about to be taking my leave, as Mr. Palinsky will tell you if you ask him."

"I know"—patiently. "But after what?"

Slade deliberately misunderstood her.

"After saying good-bye to your own very charming and delightful self, Sadie."

"Tony—Tony!"—admonishingly. "You are incorrigible! You really are!"

The woman was inside the room by now, and Slade was at the door.

"Well, for the second time, good-bye, Mr. Palinsky. Good-bye, Sadie. Pleased to have seen you again—'in the giddy flesh.'"

"That's cruel!"

"Sorry. I take it back. But you really have inspired me with a great idea!"

Slade closed the door behind him and moved off down the corridor. So Sadie Marshall was Palinsky's visitor! One of the slickest and smartest adventuresses who had ever taken to the profession. Things were—and would be—stirring.

Before he left the San Remo Hotel he ascertained that Gunter was staying there under the guise of Marcus K. Johnstone, of Richmond, Virginia, an American citizen on business in London.

"The "business" was the only grain of truth in it, Slade reflected grimly, among other crowding thoughts.

Chapter VIII

Ten Thousand Pounds!

THE files at Scotland Yard had nothing to offer in the way of information concerning anyone named Fedor Palinsky, so Slade made ready to follow up his next line of investigation, the Honorable Reginald Wentley. And Mr. Wentley, in Slade's opinion, had plenty to account for.

Who's Who gave Reginald Wentley's address as Number 34 Corebourne Terrace, S. W. 7, and a telephone call there gave the further pleasing information that the young man was out. Which suited Inspector Slade exactly. As Slade had hoped, the servant who answered his ring informed him that the Honorable Reginald was still out. Had been out, in fact, since ten o'clock that morning.

When was Mr. Wentley expected to return?

They couldn't say with any certainty, of course; he might be in after tea, or for tea. Again, he might not.

And tea-time?

In half an hour.

Slade, somewhat to the servant's surprise, decided to wait the half hour. He was shown into a comfortable room used as library and smoking room combined. He retained his overcoat. The servant gave him a handful of magazines, and left the room. For five or six minutes Slade lazily browsed over a couple of the magazines. Then he rose, put the magazines on one side, and drew from one of the pockets of his overcoat a pair of rubber overshoes. These he slipped on over his ordinary shoes.

He began a careful search of the room, keeping one eye on the door. The contents of an old walnut bureau were gone through, likewise the drawers of the two tables in the room. One of his skeleton keys opened the large cupboard, and he hurriedly went over each partition.

However, nothing of the nature he was hoping to find was revealed, and he had soon completed his examination of the room.

Cautiously he opened the door, and stepped noiselessly into the hall. There was another door immediately opposite. He entered that room. A drawing room. Three minutes sufficed to convince him that there was nothing there which would interest him.

He reëntered the hall, closing the door after him, and carefully mounted the stairs to the first landing. A door here was ajar. He peered inside. Evidently a sitting room of some kind. Time being precious, he reluctantly passed on to the next landing.

Three doors, he found, opened on to this landing. He tried the one on the right. It gave to the pressure of his wrist, and he glided silently into the room beyond. One glance showed him that this was the room he was looking for. An old feather bed, not made up, stood on one side of the room, alongside a huge trunk. Against the wall by the window was an old-fashioned dressing table, littered, as Slade appreciated, with those various articles of toilet generally to be found on an actor's dressing table. A rickety basswood wardrobe stood against the opposite wall. But what caused Slade's eyes to glisten was the sight of a coster's cap of large black and white checks. The cap lay on the top of the trunk.

In an instant he was at work. The trunk proved to contain nothing more than old clothes, and musty ones at that. Suits, scarves, coats, and caps. He turned next to the dressing table, his hopes running high. But a few seconds' work made it plain to his experienced eye that it contained nothing likely to help him. Then he tried the wardrobe. It was empty.

Then he caught sight of something which quickened the beating of his pulse. He was inside the room, standing back from the door, which he had left wide open, so as to be able to hear if anyone approached up the stairs, and for the first time he could see the inside of the door. The something that had attracted his notice was a discolored coat, which hung from a peg on the back of the door. He took the coat down from its peg and turned it over curiously.

Down the right sleeve of the coat, from just above the elbow to about the same distance below, ran a dark-colored smear. The person who had worn it had brushed his arm against something wet.

Paint! The smell was not altogether gone yet. Excitedly he took it over to the window and held it to the light.

Green paint!

The detective's eyes narrowed. His brain worked dizzily for the next few seconds, trying to grasp it all. He had been looking for something—he had hardly known what. But something. And here. . . .

Unless he had an explanation—another explanation—to offer, the Honorable Reginald Wentley had been in the stable-yard behind Pett's Court on the night of Sir Dudley Marsden's murder!

For it was the same fresh green paint that had been on the smeared lamp post there.

SLADE made the necessary effort and hung the coat back on its peg. He had his own reasons for not retaining it. Then, feeling his way carefully, he descended slowly and noiselessly into the hall. He had barely time to get into his seat, take off his overshoes, and open a magazine before the servant who had shown him in knocked and reappeared.

Mr. Wentley had not returned. Would the gentleman wait any longer, or leave a note, or——

No, the gentleman would not wait any longer. In fact, he had not realized that it was the time it was. He would phone Mr. Wentley later.

Very good.

The Yard man was shown out, and the front door closed after him by a very curious and in no way satisfied servant.

Slade stopped at the top of Corebourne Terrace to light his pipe, puzzle things out a bit if he could. He could think of no two farther extremes than Palinsky, the finished, complacent dandy, and Daphne Marsden's fiancé. Yet the two were both neck deep in the mystery. They made the mystery—50 per cent. of it, anyway. Then, again, Gunter and old Li Fang and the unknown Van Effen—were they side issues, or were they too mixed up in the real mystery surrounding the disappearance of the Marsden rubies and the murder of their owner?

And Sadie Marshall, where did she fit into this tangled skein? She was the latest comer, but by no means the least interesting. Slade had known Sadie on and off for something like five years. Once or twice she had become enmeshed in some of his cases. But she played a clever and safe hand.

If Slade knew anything about Sadie, she would be piling up trouble for other people. Who was she playing with?

But even she did not account for that other puzzle at the back of Slade's mind. What was this big something he was up against, the merciless power at which Palinsky had hinted with dread in his voice, personal dread?

Too big for the powers he, Slade, represented!

Scotland Yard! The English Public! English Justice! England herself!

His pipe was not drawing well. He stopped to relight it.

What had Sir Dudley Marsden fallen foul of? He remembered that the dead man had been a brilliant diplomat. Had his murder been by way of revenge? Had he known too much for somebody or other?

He couldn't find a motive, search as he would, which would meet the known facts,

and which, too, would account for the doubts in his own mind.

What baffled Slade particularly and kept him guessing was what Palinsky had meant by accusing Sir Dudley Marsden of being a swindler. Slade did not for the moment doubt that the man had meant every word he said. But what transactions had Sir Dudley been engaged in immediately prior to his death? Slade couldn't think of any outstanding. And he had been constantly in touch with him for the last three weeks, since the morning of the discovery that the rubies were missing.

And what had Palinsky been driving at when he said the rubies had not been stolen from the safe in Cadogan Square? Sir Dudley himself had informed Scotland Yard of their disappearance.

What *had* Palinsky been driving at? And what had the man meant when he said he could only guess who had murdered Sir Dudley Marsden?

Two persons alone stood out above the others in the case: Palinsky, because in some direct way or other he was connected with the active agents in the murder, if he was not one of them; and the Honorable Reginald Wentley, scion of the English aristocracy, because, without giving any explanations of his doings, he had been near the scene of the murder, if not actually on it. Wentley knew as much as anybody who had yet made an appearance —if not more.

That last phrase had an ominous sound. But the detective was forced to include it. What had Wentley been doing in the same neighborhood on the night before? Why had he followed him, Slade? What had he hoped to find out? Who Slade was?—or what his mission to No. 17 had been?

Was Wentley concerned in any way with the agency Palinsky had hinted at? The agency which employed Palinsky?

The whole case, viewed from all points, looked black for Palinsky—blacker for Wentley.

Meantime, where were the rubies? Who had them?

SLADE put away his pipe and took a taxi to 63B Cadogan Square.

Daphne Marsden, dressed entirely in black, save for a single strip of narrow white lace at her throat, greeted Slade with wistful, tired eyes, and a smile just as tired.

The girl was taking the death of her father very hard indeed. Slade saw the dark lines under the eyes, and a lump rose in his throat.

She had cried. But she had now done with crying. Someone had told her—afterward—that she could not see her father, that she would not be allowed to. Something awful, dastardly, had taken place . . . foul play.

The heavy-lidded eyes turned on Slade bespoke a duty recognized, a debt acknowledged. The Yard man had prepared himself for this meeting. He touched lightly on one or two points bearing on the case, sparing her feelings all he could, and then came down to the real purpose of his visit to Cadogan Square.

"The inquest, as you probably know, Miss Marsden, is tomorrow."

She nodded in silence, her face grave.

"You'll be requested to attend," he said gently. "But, of course, the coroner will not need you for more than five minutes at the outside. Just to answer one or two questions which only you can answer satisfactorily."

She passed a hand across her eyes, as though to clear her sight.

"Sir Bernard Blake called this morning. He told me. He's fetching me in his car. Reggie's going too, so that he can bring me back."

Slade's eyes dropped, but he said nothing. However, he thought a great deal. So Wentley would be at the inquest. Why? True, he was the girl's fiancé, and had been a friend of her father's. He had every right, seemingly. But was that the only reason why he was going? Or was it that . . .

"Have you seen much of Mr. Wentley

these last two days, Miss Marsden?—if I may be allowed to ask the question."

It was put casually, as though attempting to lead the conversation into more agreeable channels.

She smiled droopingly.

"No, Reggie's not been here much since—since the news. He rang me up yesterday. Said he was busy at something or other, and thought I should prefer to be alone for a while."

Slade found himself for once in a quandary.

"There haven't been any—er—letters for your father, Miss Marsden, that would be likely to interest me?"

It was lame, and he knew it. But the girl's eyes haunted him. However, he was surprised to see a sudden flash come to them. She rose to her feet steadily and again brushed a hand across her forehead.

"Why, it's funny you should ask that, Mr. Slade! I'd forgotten. Yes, there is something, a letter. It came this morning in the ordinary post, and I could not make it out when I read it. I had intended sending it on to you."

Slade showed his interest.

"Is it a business letter, or private?"

"Business. It's from a bank."

She left the room, to return within a few minutes with an envelope in her hand.

"Here it is."

Slade took it, and drew out a sheet of official-looking paper.

Then he gasped audibly. The letter was a credit draft on the Volka-Padsk Banks, Limited, and payable to Sir Dudley Marsden or order. Slade couldn't read the signature, but the sum made his eyes bulge.

Ten thousand pounds!

HE TURNED to the girl.

"I don't understand, Miss Marsden. What does it mean? What negotiations had your father been carrying on with these people?"

She shook her head, glancing at him apprehensively.

"I don't know. He didn't say anything about it to me. I did not know that he had any financial transactions pending."

Slade thought for a moment.

"You'll excuse my asking the question, Miss Marsden," he said slowly, "but your father has never had any financial worries of any kind to face, has he? I mean to say, monetary affairs?"

"No." A solitary little dimple showed at the corner of her mouth. "We've never had any money troubles of any kind. Of course, we've not been great spenders. Just Daddy and I together. There's the family property in Shropshire, as you know. Really, I know very little about our money matters."

"I see. Thank you, Miss Marsden. That settles one point straight away, then. This money"—he tapped the letter in his hand—"does not constitute part payment or full payment on any of the Shropshire property. Marsden Manor, for instance."

His tone was half interrogatory, half convinced.

"Oh, no, Mr. Slade! Daddy would never—*never*—have sold any of the old family property! He was more proud of the old manor and the park than of anything else in the world! He would—yes, he would sooner have parted with—with the rubies than a single brick of the old manor!"

"H'm! And there's nothing in his papers referring to this note, Miss Marsden?"

He tapped the envelope again. She stared at him with wide eyes.

"Nothing, Mr. Slade. I've been all through them. There are not many altogether."

Slade thought it over, and came to a decision.

"I think it would be as well, Miss Marsden, if, for the time being, at any rate, you let me retain this check—for that is

what it really amounts to. It may lead us to something which will—er—help."

"Yes, certainly, Mr. Slade. By all means." She came across the room to him. "You've discovered nothing that throws any light on—on Daddy?"

"No," he answered gravely, using her own words. "Nothing has been discovered yet which throws any light on—your father."

She breathed a little weary sigh, and glanced quickly away.

"Then you don't know who . . . who?"

Slade shook his head.

". . . But we shall leave no stone unturned, Miss Marsden. Of that you may be sure."

She faced round, head high.

"If I can help—you will tell me! Ask me!"

He bowed his head.

"I shall be only too pleased, Miss Marsden. And as it happens, there is a way, —one way."

"And that?" she asked earnestly.

Slade smiled grimly.

"If you'll kindly ask Mr. Wentley from which of Shakespeare's plays comes the quotation: 'They do no more adhere and keep place together than the Hundredth Psalm to the tune of *Green Sleeves.*' I think he'll understand."

"Why—yes! I'll ask him, of course, Mr. Slade. But I——" Her puzzled eyes were searching his face.

"He'll understand, I'm sure!"

Chapter IX

WENTLEY DISAPPEARS

SLADE found a surprise awaiting him at the Yard when he called in after dinner. The surprise was no less than a copy of that day's issue of the *South London News.* It had been put on his desk by his assistant, who had ringed a small paragraph in thick blue pencil for Slade's attention. Evidently, whoever had inserted the notice had not wasted much time.

The paragraph in particular was in a column of small advertisements of a general character, and ran as follows:

Lost some time within the last week, in the region between Lambzeth Road and Upper Kennington Lane, a gold coin bearing the date 1679. A reward of £5 (five pounds) is offered to finder of same, if he will communicate by letter with Box 714 D of this paper.

Slade gave vent to a low whistle. So the Charles II guinea was going to give another spin to the ball, which was already rolling at a pretty dizzy rate!

Straightway he sat down and wrote a letter on plain paper, notifying the inserter of the advertisement that he, Henry Border, at present unemployed, had found the coin mentioned lying in the gutter outside Alfred Pitmarsh's stables.

Then he looked up the Volka-Padsk Banks, Limited, and found that they had a place in the city, in Throgmorton Avenue. As the address given in the reference book was the same as that printed on the draft Daphne Marsden had given him, he concluded that the company had only the one branch in the metropolis. Further reference disclosed the fact that other branches of the firm existed in Paris, Berlin, New York, and Constantinople. The firm was Russian, and the head office was in Moscow.

Just then Detective Farrar, whom Slade had detailed to shadow Reginald Wentley, appeared to report.

He had hung around Corebourne Terrace until Wentley appeared, and then he had followed the man to a house in Pandover Crescent, Hampstead. Wentley's errand there had taken some little while to complete, for he had not left the house until an hour and a quarter later. He was accompanied on this occasion by another man, fairly tall in build, of athletic frame, with sharp features, long nose and lantern jaws, and a small fair, clipped moustache, of the "toothbrush" variety. The two had

taken a bus to Hendon. From the bus terminus Farrar had trailed them to the airdrome. Some few minutes afterward, he saw Wentley and the other man, changed into flying kit, taking off in a machine which the latter piloted.

Wentley, apparently, was not known on the ground. But his companion was a flying celebrity in his way. He was a certain Captain Fitzbutler, who had been an expert raider during the war. His night exploits over the Somme in 1916 had earned him the name of "the Flying Phantom."

Slade recollected the man. He had once breathlessly watched him fight a single-handed duel with three Taubes; send two crashing to earth, one in flames, and the third scuttling back over the shell-racked plateau of Santerre. The Flying Phantom had vied in fame in those days with the famous French flying-ace, Lieutenant Guynemer.

FARRAR went on with his narrative.

Fitzbutler had his own plane, and, as one of the mechanics at the airdrome believed, he had set out that morning for Yarmouth. He had done the journey twice within the last fortnight, on both occasions being accompanied by Wentley.

That had finished things as far as Detective Farrar was concerned. He couldn't follow them so he had gone back to Captain Fitzbutler's quarters, the house in Pandover Crescent. But all that he could learn there was that Captain Fitzbutler was a bachelor, and a man who seldom spoke about himself or his way of living. He belonged to the Aero and the Old Flyers Clubs, and that was all Farrar could learn.

Thanking him, Inspector Slade then went to Clapham Common where he had a rendezvous with Sergeant Clinton, who had been assigned to continue his shadowing of Sadie Marshall. Clinton was there, waiting with his report.

Yes, he had followed the woman when she left the San Remo Hotel, and had trailed her to one of the back streets running down into Pall Mall, where she lodged.

Clinton had hung about for half an hour after seeing her inside one of the houses, and had then noticed another familiar figure walking up the street—Gunter.

Slade whistled on a low note.

The American, went on Clinton, had come to call on Sadie.

Slade frowned at his glass, and finished his whisky-and-soda at a gulp. Where the devil was it all leading to? Here was Wentley now linked up with no less a person than Captain Fitzbutler, and flying about the country with him. And at the same time Sadie Marshall, another newcomer on the scene, whom he had been thinking leagued with Palinsky, was hobnobbing with Gunter, and evidently on intimate terms with him. Gunter, who was staying at the same hotel as Palinsky under an assumed name.

Could it be that Sadie was the source from which the Rat had got his information about the Marsden rubies? Were they working together? And was Palinsky their dupe—the dupe of the woman?

Appearances certainly did not discredit such a theory. The style of the game suited both the Rat and Sadie, as he knew them. A game just in their line.

If that was the case, though, and their original plan had failed—the plan of tricking this Van Effen through old Li Fang—why were they still hanging on?

What were they waiting for?

Slade smoked for several minutes in silence, puzzling over this. Then he motioned Clinton to continue.

The sergeant had waited patiently until the two had shown themselves again in the street, and had then followed them to a restaurant in Rupert Street. After which Gunter, who during lunch had been engaged in earnest conversation with Sadie, had accompanied her to a hairdresser's in Piccadilly, and there taken his leave.

The woman had next led him to a tea shop in Bond Street, where, shortly after

a quarter-past four, Palinsky had again joined her. They had left hurriedly, taking a taxi outside.

Clinton had climbed into another taxi and followed them.

The chase had led along Oxford Street and along the Edgware Road, almost to Kilburn. Palinsky and Sadie had driven up to a house in Wellsmere Road. Clinton, telling his driver to put on speed and drive straight past, had been just in time to notice the house they had disappeared into and fix its number. No. 181, on the left-hand side turning down from the main road.

He had paid off his taxi and spent another three quarters of an hour prowling about in the immediate vicinity. At length Sadie had come out alone. He had shadowed her back to her lodging behind the Haymarket, and, seeing the door closed on her, had given up the job.

SLADE'S ideas were running in two grooves at the moment. Groove number one: the possibility that the Rat and Sadie Marshall were working a joint concern and had joined hands for mutual gain and profit. Groove number two: the possibility that No. 181 Wellsmere Road, Kilburn, when investigated would prove the truth of Palinsky's statements of that morning—or otherwise.

Slade then turned his attention again to Wentley, the other side of the picture from Palinsky.

At no point had he been able to connect the two in any single instance. And with every fresh step that was taken, with every new fact dragged to light and held up to searching scrutiny, the gulf between the two widened!

It was amazing. But it was also annoying.

The next morning was a miserable affair. The sky was overcast with dark rain clouds, and there was a raw nip in the air. Slade breakfasted at his usual hour, and then made his way into the city, just avoiding the rush. He strode into the bleak outer office of the Volka-Padsk Banks, Limited, at ten minutes past ten by his watch, and presented a plain visiting card with the request to see the general manager.

A full-faced personage, with dark horn-rimmed spectacles perched on a high, beak-like nose of the sniffing kind, turned in a swivel chair at his entry, and wished him a throaty "Goot-mohning."

The detective nodded curtly, pushed one of his official cards under this person's nose, and added a few crisp words by way of explanation.

After that things got going a little faster. Mr. Bakinov, as the name of the gentleman with the large waistline proved to be, blinked like an owl for several surprised seconds, then began to talk, volubly.

He recognized the draft Slade showed him. It was, indeed, his own signature on it. How could he oblige the gentleman from Scotland Yard?

Slade soon enlightened him. He wanted, first, the name of the person against whose account the draft was drawn.

Reluctantly Mr. Bakinov gave way, helpless in the circumstances. His client's name, he said, after a little demurring, was Vladimir Palinsky.

Slade gulped and swallowed hard.

And the client's address?

181 Wellsmere Road, South Kilburn.

The Yard man's eyes danced. Could Mr. Bakinov inform him as to Mr. Vladimir Palinsky's means of income? Did such accounts pass through his hands and the books of the company?

As the detective had expected, he got a swift denial. Mr. Palinsky's private affairs were his own, he was politely told.

Had Mr. Palinsky any Continental interests that they knew of, or that they believed to exist?

No, not that they knew of.

Slade smiled to himself. Mr. Bakinov, if he was lying, was mighty careful to lie to the letter. He was not for committing himself.

The detective made his way straight back to the Yard. For a couple of hours he devoted himself to the task of setting down on paper the latest developments in the case, and in bringing his case book up-to-date. When he had finished he glanced at his watch. The inquest should have been over some little while by now.

He took up the receiver and gave the number of the Lambeth Road station. Soon he heard Neville's voice over the wire.

"That you, Neville? Oh! Half an hour ago? And how did it go off? Eh? Packed? Yes, I thought as much. But the evidence. Oh, you did—eh? So Munsen turned out trumps—did the trick, in fact. Good for him! What's that? Postponed for another fortnight? Yes—yes. Yes—I got that. H'm! So she came through all right. Better than you expected—eh? Sensation! I should say so. However, we've got some time to work it up in now. Ought to be able to make a do. What's that? Yes, I agree. Yes, hands down. Every time. H'm! That remains to be seen. I'll let you know—sure thing!"

He rang off, and put through another number. Daphne Marsden's low tones answered his inquiry this time. Mr. Wentley had just left. He had gone, she understood, to his club. After a few words of sympathetic inquiry Slade again rang off.

HE KNEW Wentley's club, the Young Services. Picking up his coat and hat, he left the office at once, and hailed a taxi. He wanted to catch Wentley while he could get him alone for a few minutes.

The young man was sitting in the bar reading a book when Slade approached him. At the feel of a hand on his shoulder he glanced up quickly. Seeing who it was, his mouth screwed up as he rose to his feet and pushed his chair back.

"I want a little talk with you, Mr. Wentley," explained the detective, coming straight to the point. "Do you mind?"

"Not in the least," answered the other promptly, with well-affected good humor, closing his book. "I'd rather been expecting it."

They moved into the comfortable lounge and seated themselves in the far corner opposite the entrance. Slade then pulled his chair round to a businesslike angle, so that he half faced the other.

"You know the quotation, Mr. Wentley?" he opened up. He leaned a little closer as he put the words. The other shook his head.

"I didn't, although I know what was implied by it. However, I know now. I've looked it up, you see. From *The Merry Wives*. I ought to have known. And now—Inspector?" There was a slight, expectant pause between the second and last words. He looked up.

"What have you got to say?" Slade's tone was noncommittal, almost casual.

"Ah! You're a stickler for keeping to the point, Inspector. But what if I say nothing?"

Slade shrugged.

"I don't think you will," he answered simply.

However, there was an ominous ring in the words. At least, so it seemed to the man facing him. Slade's face was a blank. The young man must have expected some other reply. He fidgeted for a moment, and then glanced across the table with a slight, puzzled frown.

"Well, what do you want me to say?" His tongue sounded a little less flexible.

Slade saw that the time had come to show something of the hand he was holding.

"You know very well not what I want, Mr. Wentley, but what I expect, and you will appreciate the difference. You know very well, also, that you are at present placed in a curious position—not alto-

gether a desirable one, if I may say so—as regards a very sad incident which I will refrain from mentioning. I leave it to you to make your own statement, Mr. Wentley, as you think fit. I need hardly suggest that anything but the truth would be words wasted."

Wentley finished his drink, and moved the glass away from his elbow, leaning forward also.

"You saw the coat with the paint stain on the arm. It was in the old lumber room, behind the door. I know about your calling, of course. I guessed it was you when I was told. And I guessed that you had stumbled against something which had brought out my name with a query mark after it. I'm right so far, am I not, Inspector?"

Slade nodded.

"Quite right," he said quietly.

THE other lit a cigarette.

"And when you came across that coat you put an obvious two and two together, and got a very obvious four. Easy! And now it becomes necessary in the eyes of the police for me to make some explanation of my actions, no matter whether my silence is justifiable or not."

"It does"—curtly. "We have our duty to perform."

"Truly an admirable sentiment, Inspector. You believe I was in the stable yard on the night of Sir Dudley's murder then?"

Slade saw no reason for not answering.

"I do."

"You believe I—I"—his voice quavered—"know something about the—the murder?"

Slade's chin stuck out aggressively.

"I believe you know more than you have wished us to believe concerning what happened that night."

"Ah! You—you're not forgetting I'm engaged to Daphne Marsden?"

"I am not. In fact, I am remembering acutely."

The young man bit his lip. He glanced at the detective's grim-set face nervously.

"If"—he hesitated—"if I told you—said I knew something about what happened that night, and that I wanted time—badly—for some reason which I could not state, would you be prepared to grant me that time?"

"I cannot promise. I haven't the authority."

There was no hesitation about the detective's rejoinder. And his expression did not belie his words.

The young man at once, scenting danger, doubled in his tracks.

"Mind you, I don't say I do know. I only said—if I did!"

"I understand, perfectly. All the same," he added, "I'm curious."

"I know you are—infernally so!" Wentley sat back. Then, reflectively: "I don't know, quite, what to say to you, Inspector, and that's God's own truth!"

Slade saw in a flash the way things were drifting, and stepped in at once.

"There's only one thing to say, the truth. I mean it—oh, yes! Better get it off your chest. You'll feel easier."

Wentley's chin sank.

"I'm not so sure about that as you are. There are things—things which——" He didn't meet Slade's eyes.

"You know who murdered Sir Dudley!" The accusation came from scarcely moving lips.

Wentley started, and paled suddenly.

"That's an ugly word," he blustered. "What—what do you mean, Inspector?"

"I mean, who shot Sir Dudley? Tell me that!"

The eyes of the two met. The young man's dropped almost instantly.

"Good God! You know that! You—you know he was shot! I thought——" He blundered hopelessly.

Slade brought him up with a jerk.

"I don't want to know what you thought, Mr. Wentley. I want what you know!"

There was a pause. Then Wentley got to his feet. His face was ghastly, his eyes sparkling.

"I—I can't tell you anything. I can't—now!"

He spoke the words in a low, tense voice. He was staring past the detective, seeing nothing.

Slade's lips compressed. "You know what that means?"

Wentley faced him with head high.

"You—you'll make out a warrant for my arrest!"

"I shan't. Headquarters will. And the charge?"

Wentley breathed hard, but said nothing. His mouth worked, and the muscles of his throat palpitated. He was having a hard fight of it.

Then Slade interposed with a quiet: "Well, what is it to be?"

Wentley wavered for the last time. Then glanced at Slade with eyes full of pain and braced himself.

"I—I can't say anything. I—can't!"

"Very well! Good-morning, Mr. Wentley. I am sorry."

Slade picked up his hat and walked out.

At half-past six that evening the detective called round personally at 34 Corebourne Terrace, to hear strange news.

Mr. Wentley had left. He had come in just before lunch, and, staying only to say that he would be away for a few days, and that they would be hearing from him in due course, had packed a suitcase and gone. He had not said where.

So Wentley had decamped! It looked ugly.

Slade turned away from the house with mixed feelings. Had he been taken in by the young man? Was he worse than he had thought? However, Wentley's action now left Slade with only one course to pursue. He felt sorry for Daphne Marsden.

In a couple of hours Wentley's name would be on the official "wanted" list. In twelve hours the warrant would be through.

And then—look out, Mr. Wentley!

Chapter X

THE BLACK HAT

THINGS were moving so rapidly that Slade found it expedient to work on Sunday. Farrar had picked up something which might prove to have a bearing in the future, and meanwhile it was decidedly interesting.

He had got into Yarmouth soon after one o'clock, having lunched on the train, and began inquiries at once. He had hired a bicycle and pushed out to the neighboring flying school. Fortunately he had chanced on the right man at first go. The mechanic knew Fitzbutler by sight, and had also recognized the policeman's description of Wentley. He remembered the two flying in on the previous day, and, what was luckier still, had overheard part of a conversation between Fitzbutler and Wentley.

The former had mentioned the name of a public house, the Lord Nelson, and they had apparently been arguing whether a certain Samuel Crump would or would not take a reasonable offer. What the offer was, or what it concerned, the mechanic had not been able to tell. Farrar had paid well for the information, and, after impressing on the man the necessity for keeping his mouth shut, had ridden back to the town. After much inquiry and no little turning and returning over the same ground, he had found the Lord Nelson, a not very wholesome-looking place from the outside, situated at the back of the Fish Wharf. Tactful inquiries had again put him on the right track. Mr. Samuel Crump was an ex-fisherman who had made good and now owned some of the finest craft in trawlers that plied the Roads. He was not old, not more than fifty-five or so, and regularly, in season

and out, took the helm of one of his outgoing trawlers.

Farrar, having had Mr. Samuel Crump pointed out to him, and having successfully maneuvered to get him into conversation, had found him a difficult man to draw. But little by little, he had learned what he wanted to know. Wentley or Fitzbutler, one of them—he didn't know which—was chartering one of Mr. Crump's trawlers for a few days. They were not sure when they would require it. Possibly they would arrive late one night. But they wanted the boat ready—provisioned, manned, and prepared to get under way at a moment's notice.

Mr. Crump had scouted the idea at first. It had not sounded all aboveboard, and he had washed his hands of it, referring them to some other owner of boats. But they had hung on, persuading by degrees. It had taken three visits to complete the transaction. Mr. Crump's boats had a reputation, they maintained stoutly. They wouldn't think of engaging one belonging to anyone else. Such subtle flattery and an offer of a substantial part payment in advance had seen the end of the first stage in the business. The money had changed hands. Mr. Crump had a trawler, his second best, the *Mary Lou,* waiting such time as they should arrive to claim her. And she had a crew that . . . Well, he meant to say, but didn't.

He had been very hazy about that crew, treating the matter more in the nature of a joke. Farrar had been unable to get any more from him.

Slade congratulated Farrar on the success of his journey, and after he had rapidly run through the written report dismissed him.

He didn't stop to settle down and think over this new feature. He had something else in mind. It was his intention to make a call on Mr. Vladimir Palinsky early that afternoon—before he was expected.

NO. 181 Wellsmere Road was nearly at the end, a plain brick house with French windows top and bottom in the front, and a side-entrance marked "Tradesmen."

Slade rang, and his summons was answered by a young girl in stiff-starched apron and cuffs.

Was Mr. Palinsky in?

Yes.

Would she be good enough to give him his card?

Certainly, if the gentleman would oblige by "stepping this way, please."

He was conducted into the front parlor, and left alone for a few minutes. The room, he noted, was tastefully furnished and not overcrowded. A couple of delicately hued vases of Eastern workmanship stood on the low marble mantelshelf. He was examining them when the door was opened softly.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Slade. Ah! Pretty pair, aren't they? Seventeenth century Turkish ware. Unmatchable, so I am given to understand by those who ought to know."

Slade turned round. The newcomer was smiling cheerfully. He was a commanding figure, even in a smoking jacket and gray flannel trousers. The stocky-built body of a navvy supported the pale, well-defined features of a dreamer and idealist. Mr. Vladimir Palinsky was smiling, but in his dark, smouldering eyes lived all the restless yearning of the schemer, the man who lives only for the unattainable.

The warmth in his eyes as they met Slade's almost hurt.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Palinsky," said the detective in a toneless voice. "I am a stranger, and——"

"Not quite," smiled the other, gesturing with his hands. "I've heard of you from my cousin."

Slade knew intuitively that he was about

to measure blades with a master swordsman.

"Your cousin?"

"Yes, my cousin Fedor."

"Ah! Of course!"

Palinsky waved Slade into a chair, and seated himself in another, which he drew closer to the detective's.

"And you've just come to ask all about the ten thousand pounds—eh? You want to know all what it means, and what I'm paying it for—eh?"

Slade grinned back.

"You certainly don't believe in dawdling, Mr. Palinsky," he commented.

The other shrugged genially.

"Why should I? A police officer doesn't drop in on anyone he hasn't seen before on a Sunday afternoon for a little congenial chat. At least, they don't in England. You came on business. Well, agreed. Let's get on with it."

Slade appeared to arouse himself.

"By all means. First, then, what did that ten thousand pounds constitute? I suppose you're going to answer?"

Palinsky politely ignored the latter question.

"Constitute?" he queried.

"Why was it paid, and for what?"

Palinsky nodded, and smiled disarmingly.

"Oh, I see. Yes. Well, Mr. Slade, it 'constitutes' a first payment for an article of purchase."

"First payment!" The Yard man's tone betrayed surprise, which was more genuine than might have been supposed.

"Yes. A second payment of another ten thousand pounds is due in a month's time."

Slade opened his mouth to speak, but closed it quickly. He wanted to get the hang of it all.

"Are there any further payments after that one?"

Palinsky was enjoying himself.

"Sure thing! Two!"

Slade swallowed.

"Of similar sums?"

"No. Of fifty thousand—each!"

SLADE gaped. A hundred and twenty thousand pounds in all! For what? Then a sudden thought flashed across his mind. A hundred and twenty thousand pounds was the market value of . . . He put the question.

"And all this money you are paying for —*what?*"

"Something—a collection of things—very famous in their way."

"You mean . . ."

Palinsky suddenly jerked his head in a knowing way.

"Of course I do!"

"The—the Marsden rubies!"

Palinsky shat back and spread his hands in a gesture meant to convey finality.

"What else?" The gesture ended in a magniloquent sweep.

Slade felt as though the floor were slipping away from under his feet. Palinsky added a little touch.

"But they were stolen, you tell me? Ha! ha! ha! Three weeks before, wasn't it?"

Slade felt more than heard the slightly mocking note in the other's tones, but that note grated.

"You can assure me, Mr. Palinsky, that they were not stolen, then?"

"I can. A little trick of the owner's. You see, those rubies happened to be a family heirloom or something, collected by one of the Marsdens last century. It wouldn't have done to sell them in an open market—heh? The old name, and all that sort of thing. So this nice little affair was staged. They were to be stolen."

"Where are the rubies now? In your possession?"

Palinsky laughed lightly.

"No. You see, I'm only an agent, really. Buying for someone else."

Slade knew the man was deliberately flouting him, but he kept his temper.

"The people on whose behalf you're acting, then, Mr. Palinsky, are they in England?"

Palinsky smiled benignly.

"That is a question, Mr. Slade, which

cannot be answered by either 'yes' or 'no.'"

The detective's under lip stiffened. "Are the Marsden rubies in England or not?" Then, dryly, as Palinsky stroked his chin: "But perhaps you'll tell me this also cannot be answered by a plain 'yes' or 'no.'"

Palinsky's hand left his face.

"I shan't." Then, just as dryly: "There's no reason I can see, Mr. Slade, why you, representing British law and order as you do, should not be told that the Marsden gems are no longer in this country. You see, I'm considerate with you. I realize perfectly well that by telling you this I'm saving you a heap of guesswork!"

The expression on the man's face was droll. His wide, apelike shoulders were raised to a level with his thin, narrow ears, and his eyebrows were arched quizzically.

Slade was silent for several seconds.

"Where are they, then? In which country?"

"They are in no country." Palinsky was still smiling.

"I see"—evenly. "At the bottom of the sea?"

"No. At the top of it, I trust."

There was truth in the words, a truth that, for no apparent reason, made Slade suddenly think of Yarmouth.

"Your patron must be a very singular person, Mr. Palinsky," he led off, at a tangent. "Would you mind telling me his name?"

"Not in the least, if I were at liberty to do so. But I'm not."

Slade's eyes became suddenly shrewd. He hastily counted his chances, and made his throw.

"Perhaps you'll let me represent your patron by a symbol, then? Say, an eagle pecking at a skull."

THE smile vanished from Palinsky's face. He rose to his feet in a movement that was neither a bounce nor a spring, but something between the two, and he came toward the detective with head lowered.

"You may, but it would be unwise to! You'd best forget that symbol. Forget you ever saw it—forget what it looks like—forget it has ever been!"

Slade kept his seat, but met the other's eyes squarely.

"And if I refuse?"

"You'll regret it!"

"And if I prefer to run the chance of regretting it?"

"The chance is a thin one. You won't run long!"

"You mean, I'll be put out of the way?"

"I mean, you'll have no one to thank for what happens but your own pigheaded self. We'll say this 'constitutes' a second warning." A heavy pause. "There won't be a third!"

"H'm! All this is very pointed, Mr. Palinsky. I suppose Sir Dudley Marsden didn't get a third warning?"

Palinsky scowled, and the light in his eyes seemed to die. His lips moved slowly.

"He didn't. He didn't even get a second. We're more lenient with you."

"I'm sure that's kind of you. But why, pray?"

"Because you know less!"

Slade folded his arms.

"So that I'm given to understand it's my ignorance alone which is keeping me safe?"

Palinsky spread his hands, and his mouth drooped at the corners.

"As you please. It doesn't matter much how you put it. You know your English tag—'A little knowledge . . .'"

Slade passed his tongue over his lips.

"And what about 'a little more knowledge . . .'?"

Palinsky's head drew back. "You mean?"

"Just this: there's a murder on our hands, and a murderer to be brought to book. You know something, and we want information. Now, what's to prevent us pulling you in?"

Palinsky studied the other with half-

closed eyes. He was just unsure enough to be left wavering.

"You haven't a charge," he accused, suddenly on the defensive.

At last Slade was feeling happier. He had got his man on the run.

"A mere matter of putting our heads together for a few minutes."

The other's eyes grew hostile.

"It would be useless, and you know it! I wouldn't tell—not a word! And if I started to, a way would soon be found to quiet me!"

"By whom?"

Palinsky's eyes flickered.

"My so-called 'patron.'!"

He had turned aside and moved toward the fireplace. Slade reviewed the situation rapidly. He rose and joined the other.

"Mr. Palinsky," he said, with quiet emphasis, "I've already guessed that I'm up against something big. Yourself and your cousin, this symbol I'm warned to forget, certain strange details touching the murder of Sir Dudley Marsden, the mystery—if there is one—surrounding the rubies themselves; all this points to something—big. Out of the ordinary. Something which concerns big issues. Perhaps with big prizes at stake. Now get this clear, Mr. Palinsky. I don't care what it is—how big the issue may be—a reckoning has got to be made sooner or later. And you can take it I'll do my utmost to set the account square. I'll give you this opportunity. If you can say anything now which will help me—say it. I'm waiting to hear it."

PALINSKY'S lips trembled for a second. Then he turned to Slade and faced him, his dark eyes glowing with suppressed excitement.

"Listen, Mr. Slade," he said, in a voice which matched the other's in calmness, "you've asked, and I'll answer—this much. Everything on our—on my side concerning those rubies has been straight. Dead straight! Get that. I've got the rubies, and I'm paying, as agreed. About what happened to Sir Dudley Marsden a few nights ago I'll say nothing. Positively nothing! But I'll make one personal comment. He deserved it. And listen—if he hadn't been in this country he'd have got worse! You might not think it possible, but he would. Far worse!"

For a moment Palinsky's eyes burned like red-hot coals. His fingers trembled passionately. Before Slade knew what he was about he had thrown back his smoking jacket and torn open the shirt underneath, exposing his bare flesh.

He came a step nearer, and Slade winced.

Right across the man's chest ran a broad, dark brown weal, searing the discolored flesh. In places the flesh had been so tortured that it was a mass of tiny blue-black scales.

Palinsky grinned horribly.

"Siberia!" he muttered hoarsely. "Siberia—chained down in the mines! Body and soul fettered — broken —bled white as the snow up above on the dunghills! Bent —bent! Until —snap! The work is completed. Sir Dudley Marsden! Ach! He was one of the lucky ones. Me!"—he smote his chest with the flat of his hand—"I was nine years dying! Ha! ha! ha! Nine years, and then they couldn't kill me! I was hot and headstrong, they said. A danger to the Tsar. So they tried to take my life. Ha! ha! They tried to wear me out, break me as they broke the others. But they couldn't! They couldn't!" He swore savagely in a language Slade guessed to be Russian.

The detective saw his massive throat bulge, and he almost pitied the man. Then all at once Palinsky was calmer. With

steady fingers he rebuttoned his shirt. He lit a cigarette.

Slade spoke.

"You've left me with nothing to say, Mr. Palinsky. All the same, I'll not promise that the time won't come when you'll be called upon to make a statement. The choice'll be yours. For myself—I'm prepared."

Palinsky's mouth worked, but he said nothing for a moment. Just as he was about to speak he was interrupted by the ringing of the front-door bell. He turned sharply on his heel. Both heard the patter of the maid's footsteps along the hall outside. They heard the street door closed. A few seconds later the door of the room was pushed open and a stranger entered, in a manner conveying familiarity with his surroundings.

He stopped short. His eyes had met Slade's. The detective started, but had recovered himself the next instant.

In the newcomer's hand was a large black hat and he was also wearing a "long, darkish coat"—almost down to his ankles, in fact.

Slade glanced again at the newcomer's face, but the man had turned aside and was conversing in a low tone with Palinsky. At a favorable moment Slade interrupted them.

"I'll be getting along now, then, Mr. Palinsky, if you don't mind."

Palinsky turned, his old smile illuminating his face.

"Sure, Mr. Slade. Well, I won't embarrass you by offering my hand, and I won't wish you good luck. But I'll wish you good-afternoon—and good sense!"

Slade had to smile ruefully. Palinsky, after a nod to the newcomer, glanced again at Slade, and passed through the door. The Yard man took a couple of steps forward, and suddenly wheeled round.

"Duncan!" he muttered in a low tone. "You here!"

The man holding the wide-brimmed black hat in his right hand held up his left warningly.

"Not now!" he breathed, with a sidelong glance at the door. "Later!"

Slade nodded and passed out. Palinsky, still smiling, saw him to the street door, and closed it after him. The detective, without a glance back, put his best foot forward, and in a few minutes turned into the main road, continuing at a smart pace.

Duncan! The man with the black hat, who had met Sir Dudley on the night of his murder! Who in heaven's name would be the next person brought to light!

Duncan! Slade had worked with him on more than one case in the early days, when Sanger Duncan had been one of the most promising inspectors at the Yard and Slade himself a struggling sergeant. Later Duncan had left the force to enter the Secret Service. He had vanished. Little or nothing had been heard of him for the last three years.

And here he was cropping up in this case!

When almost in sight of the Marble Arch Slade hailed a passing taxi. But still, he reflected, as he lounged back in the seat, Duncan had promised to explain later. Slade had to comfort himself as best he could with the reflection.

Chapter XI

THE FLYING PHANTOM

MONDAY morning brought a new report from Clinton, but it contained nothing exciting. Neither Sadie Marshall nor Gunter had led him on any interesting new lines, and as for Fedor Palinsky, the young man seemed to be acting under orders to lie low. So far as Clinton knew neither the Rat nor Palinsky had received any letters by ordinary mail.

There were two other reports in. One from Inspector Malleson, who notified headquarters that so far as his men were concerned Li Fang had once more returned to a settled state and was lying low. Anyway, he had nothing to offer to

which he attached any great importance. The other brief notice was from a man Slade had detailed to watch Palace Street, and No. 17 in particular.

The second mail, however, brought Slade a package which held greater promise. It was a letter enclosed in another envelope, which was addressed to

Mr. Henry Borden,
43A Harleyford Road,
Vauxhall,
S. E. 11

Written in a spidery, cramped hand, the short note ran as follows:

If you will be outside The Horns Hotel, Kennington Cross, at half-past five Monday evening, and bring the coin with you, I will meet you there and give you the £5 as per advertisement. I shall be wearing a Scotch plaid scarf. Please do not mention this to anyone.

The "please" had been struck through with a thick ink line.

Slade refolded the note and put it back in the envelope.

Quick work. The owner, whoever he was, was mighty anxious to get the coin back. The postmark on the envelope bore Saturday's date, 2:15 P. M., and had apparently been posted in the W. 1 district. Slade had only posted his letter on Friday evening.

Slade rang, and a constable appeared.

"Farrar in?"

"Yes, sir."

"Send him through, please."

"Yes, sir."

When the plain-clothes man appeared:

"Sit down, Farrar. I've got a little jaunt for you this morning. I want you to call in at the offices of this paper"—Slade passed the other his copy of the *South London News*—"and get 'em to tell you all they know about this advertisement; and who put it in. They might not know much, but what they do'll help. I want the information by one-thirty sharp."

"Yes, sir." Farrar folded up the paper, put it in his pocket, and went out.

Slade picked up the receiver at his elbow and gave the number of the Marsden household. He waited, receiver to ear, until he heard Daphne Marsden's voice over the wire. No, she had not heard anything from Mr. Wentley. Why, she was quick to ask; was anything the matter? Slade put her off with an evasive reply and returned the receiver to its hook.

So Wentley had not communicated with his fiancée. He meant running no risks, then. Slade's face was grave. He sat back and took out his pipe.

There was the possibility now that Duncan would throw some light in the gloom, but Slade's hopes were not sanguine. Duncan was no longer a policeman. He would probably prove as close where his own department was concerned as the Yard man himself.

The house phone on Clinton's desk suddenly buzzed ear-splittingly. Slade unhooked the receiver.

"Hullo!" His manner changed. He took the pipe from his mouth. "Yes, sir. At once."

The Chief! Slade opened his drawer, took out his case book and a large pile of tape-tied papers, and slipped his pipe back into his pocket.

FOR three and a half hours he was in the Chief's room. When at last he came out there was a new light in his eyes. He went straight back to his office, where Farrar was awaiting him, slumped down into a chair, and threw his case book into the desk in front of him. The papers he had left with the Chief.

"Good news, Farrar," he said, almost gaily. "We're going to get a move on with this case. The Chief's going to concentrate. Late hours for everybody. He's had some inkling, I gather, from Higher Up. We're not the only people concerned. The Home Office is fretting

about something or other which is mixed up with this Marsden affair, but I don't know what. The Chief was pretty close. Anyhow, we're going to have Brawley and the Squads in. Quite a picnic, all of us together."

Farrar chuckled, and Slade came to earth.

"Well, what turned out of it?"

The plain-clothes man looked up.

"It seems that the person who inserted that advertisement called round at the offices in the Camberwell Road on Thursday morning last, just as the last batch of sheets was going for press. Fortunately they were able to insert the paragraph. A letter turned up on Saturday morning, followed an hour later by this person, asking for any inquiry. He had given the name of Edward Richards, but I don't think we need take any notice of that. He took the letter, said it was all right, and that's all they know about it."

Slade nodded.

"Just what I thought. That'll do, Farrar, thanks."

At a quarter-past five Slade, none too well dressed, in an old bowler hat with a greasy brim and down-at-heel shoes, a clump of unkempt bristles shading his upper lip, and wearing a pair of bent gold-rimmed glasses, alighted from a tram at Kennington Gate and walked back toward The Horns Hotel.

He had been standing on the pavement corner for some five minutes or so when a tall man of military appearance drew up in a taxi, paid off the driver, and sauntered slowly up to the door of the saloon bar of the hotel. As he turned Slade, watching him out of the corner of his eye, saw that he was wearing a plaid scarf. The detective waited until the man had moved a few yards farther along the pavement, coming under a street lamp.

Suddenly the hands in his coat pockets clenched in a tight grip. The man had turned so that his face was presented at full view. Slade had been looking at photographs of that face on Saturday afternoon. Photographs in newspapers some ten years old.

Fitzbutler—the Flying Phantom!

All that Slade had ever heard about the man, about his daredevil stunts and reckless escapades over the Flanders front, swept back on him in a wave. For a moment he was filled with admiration. It was the first time he had ever seen Fitzbutler in the flesh—seen him, that is, to discern his features. But he knew he wasn't mistaken. The man had an air about him. There was a poise, a lift about the square-set shoulders, that the keen, appraising eye of the detective at once noted and appreciated.

HE WAITED until Fitzbutler had moved back. Then he approached him. Fitzbutler saw him coming, and fixed him with a sharp, penetrating glance. Slade sniffed, and plucked nervously at his scrubby mustache with a grubby finger and thumb.

"Are you the gent what was——" he began timidly, and stopped short.

Fitzbutler had given him one last look and taken out a wallet, and was already engaged in counting five separate pound notes.

Slade allowed his eyes to glisten.

"Where's the coin?" Fitzbutler spoke bruskly, as though in a hurry to get the business over and be off.

Slade rummaged in an inner pocket.

"I got it, guv'nor," he half sobbed, both eyes riveted on the notes in the other's hand.

He held out the coin. Fitzbutler took it, turned it over, and slipped it in his pocket.

"Here you are, my man."

The five pound notes were in Slade's ready fist, and the detective was counting them over with fumbling fingers.

"Now, listen!"

Slade looked up apprehensively. He hurriedly rammed the notes in his pocket, as though to make sure of them.

"Yus, guv'nor?"

"Not a word—you understand? Not a word to a soul! You're sure you understand?"

"Yussir!"

"Not a soul, I said!"

"I 'eard yer all right, guv'nor. I savvy. You don't want nothin' said about this 'ere." Slade winked, and jerked his thumb toward his pocket.

"Good. Well, then, that's settled." Fitzbutler moved as though to walk away—hesitated. "Wounded?" he asked, almost savagely.

"Yussir—Wipers."

"Wife and kids?"

"No, guv'nor. On'y me brother. Lorst a leg at Ginchy. One o' them blasted nine-twos."

Fitzbutler's other hand flashed out. He turned sharply away, leaving Slade to gape at a new, crisp five-pound note which had somehow got into his hand. When the detective looked up the ex-flying ace was clambering into a taxi.

As the taxi turned Slade dived in front of a bus. Wrenching open the door of the first cab drawn up on the rank opposite, he caught the startled driver by the shoulder.

"See him?"—pointing. "Well, keep him in sight. Double fare if you bring it off."

The driver cast a doubtful glance at Slade's rigout.

"This is a Yard job. Look alive, my man!"

The driver sprang to life as though galvanized.

The chase led over Westminster Bridge and along Victoria Street before Slade's driver drew anywhere near level with the taxi in front. By that time, however, the detective was a different-looking personage. His shabby coat, turned inside-out, revealed a rather smart brown worsted pattern. A belt gave an additional touch of slimness. The gold-rimmed glasses and dark mustache had disappeared, their places taken by large horn-rimmed spectacles and a short-clipped fair mustache, not unlike Fitzbutler's own. The "choker" that had been round Slade's neck at Kennington had been untied, revealing a collar and tie. A few daubs with a small wire brush had taken the faked shininess out of the hard felt of the bowler, and a couple of adjustable rubber heels had brought the bottoms of his shoes level.

By the time Slade had finished his change they were rattling through Hampstead. The taxi in front turned into Pandover Crescent, and Slade, now sure of his man, told his driver to stop.

The man stared with unflinching curiosity as Slade got out, half inclined not to believe the evidence of his own eyes. In place of the "out-of-work" who had got into his cab at Kennington Gate there now stepped out a smart, brisk-mannered city man. Slade added a liberal tip, and the man touched his cap in a happy, dazed sort of fashion.

CAPTAIN FITZBUTLER was in the hall talking to a servant when Slade rang. He opened the door himself in answer to the detective's ring, and inquired in a loud voice what the devil Slade wanted.

Guilelessly the detective replied that he had called to see Captain Fitzbutler, if that gentleman was at home.

Well, he was, he was given to understand. And what did Slade want with him?

Slade replied modestly that he was from Scotland Yard, one Sergeant Merrick. He had been sent, he explained by Inspector Slade.

Fitzbutler pricked up his ears at the mention of Slade's name, and the detective

was shown in at once. As usual, Slade retained his coat and hat.

He had figured it out that Wentley must have mentioned him to Fitzbutler, and had put the airman on his guard. Therefore, purporting to come from himself, it was more likely that Fitzbutler would say something he would not have said had he known himself talking to Slade. The chances were that he would try to draw out the supposed Sergeant Merrick in the hope of putting himself wise about some of Slade's plans and ideas. Slade was reckoning on Fitzbutler's knowing where Wentley was hiding.

The detective was shown into the airman's sitting room, a sparsely furnished apartment, lined with three rows of book shelves, and hung with sporting trophies and pictures of interest to an aviator. A typical soldier-bachelor's den.

Fitzbutler lit a cigar and strolled across to a small side table and poured himself out a drink.

"Well, what d'you want to know, Sergeant?" His tone was not very encouraging. He drained his glass, set it down, and returned his cigar to the corner of his mouth.

"I want to know where Mr. Wentley is!"

It was bearding the lion with a vengeance, and Slade knew it. The cigar shook.

"Then you'll damn well have to find out! It's no confounded concern of mine!"

"You'll excuse me, Captain Fitzbutler, if I venture the remark that I think it is."

The other drew himself up stiffly.

"Eh—what's this?" He advanced truculently. "You dare to contradict me, Sergeant—eh, confound you?"

Slade saw the pitfall in time, and sidestepped adroitly.

"Not at all, sir. I'm here, rather, to obtain your confirmation."

The other was checked.

". . . About Mr. Wentley's whereabouts."

Fitzbutler breathed out a cloud of smoke, and blew on the glowing end of his cigar.

"Look here, my good fellow," he commenced coolly, taking a different line. "I've already intimated that you'll have to——"

"I know you have," interposed the other gently. "So there's really no need to repeat it. The Honourable Reginald Wentley, if we are not mistaken, is to be found in——" Slade paused with a purpose.

The other looked up quickly.

"Hump!"

"In Yarmouth," finished Slade.

It was not altogether a chance shot. Slade had weighed the possibilities more than once.

Fitzbutler was caught in mid-career. He stared at the police officer in open amazement.

"Well, I'll be damned!" The cigar was pushed back in his mouth.

"I sincerely hope not, Captain Fitzbutler. It would hardly be a fitting fate for the Flying Phantom."

"Pah!"—ignoring the last remark. "So you've got on to that, have you? Confoundedly smart for once! What d'you mean by it—heh?—barging in like this?"

SLADE had certainly succeeded in rumpling the man's temper. The professional soldier's contempt for the civilian's custodians was asserting itself. Slade met the outbreak with a suavity intended to prove oil on troubled waters.

"We've got to satisfy ourselves that there are adequate reasons for all things," he offered meekly by way of explanation.

Fitzbutler snorted.

"Satisfy yourselves! Great Scott! I suppose I'm to be trounced and bully-ragged until a parcel of jumped-up snivelers, with the cheek of the devil, are satisfied—damn 'em!—that I—that I——" He had to stop. The explosion was wearing itself out in its own heat.

"No, that Mr. Wentley . . ."

The choleric captain swallowed a mouth-

ful of smoke and spluttered desperately.

"It's the same thing! Same thing! Impudence! Sheer, preposterous impudence! I tell you, Sergeant, I won't stand for it. Good Gad, man, d'you think you've got me in one of your confounded docks? I tell you, I——"

"I wish you would, sir. It would save time."

Fitzbutler glared.

"What?" he sang, his voice nearly breaking.

"I wish you'd tell me, sir, whether Mr. Wentley is in Yarmouth or not."

Fitzbutler passed a hand over his eyes.

"Jaggers! And they let such men live! Feed 'em! Educate 'em! Allow 'em to to crawl about the damned earth!" He lifted his eyes piously.

Slade, remembering the five-pound note in his pocket, and the questions which had preceded its being thrust into his hand, smiled to himself. He had met the blustering type before. But Fitzbutler he had to vote in a class of his own.

The airman's eyes dropped suddenly.

"Well, he is, damn you! And you won't touch him"—threateningly—"or I'll—I'll strafe you! The whole damn meddling crowd of you!" Captain Frazer Fitzbutler, D. S. O., D. F. C., sought cover behind a huge screen of cigar smoke.

Slade did not take the trouble to conceal his smile this time.

"Thank you, Captain Fitzbutler. I'm sure Mr. Wentley is fortunate in having such a staunch friend. However, I'm also sure you must appreciate the delicacy of his position."

"Position be blowed!"—flaming up again. "There's no deuced delicacy that I know of!"

"No?"—soothingly. "I should have thought so."

"Well, you'd have thought damn well wrong—as per usual, with your crowd of patent dunderheads!"

Slade merely evinced a mild surprise at this.

"Perhaps you don't understand me, Captain. I'm referring to certain details respecting the murder of Sir Dudley Marsden, and as Mr. Wentley is not here to explain perhaps you'll be kind enough to oblige."

The captain drew himself stiffly to attention.

"Me?"—coldly.

Slade glanced at him. There was an awkward pause, during which the airman's cigar smouldered fragrantly between his fingers. For the first time since his entry into the room the detective found Fitzbutler dropping his original pose.

"Weren't you present too, Captain?" Slade put the question quietly.

"I?" And on a different note: "I!"

"You were."

Fitzbutler's fair mustache fairly bristled.

"You can prove your accusation, Sergeant?"—with chilling hauteur.

Slade shrugged lazily.

"I haven't made any accusation yet. All the same, there's sufficient evidence to support the theory that you were with Mr. Wentley on the night of Sir Dudley Marsden's murder!"

"Concrete evidence?"

"Assuredly."

"Such as, please?"

A mischievous light danced in Slade's gray eyes.

"Such as the coin in your pocket, Captain Fitzbutler!"

THE airman stared. "Good—good God!"

But it was not Slade's intention to let him down too lightly.

"You'll now, perhaps, discern a certain delicateness in the situation, Captain Fitzbutler."

The airman was in a state that was ob-

livious to the finer subtleties of a gently imposed irony.

"That guinea, though!" he still harped. "How in hell did you know?" A horrible suspicion had just flashed through his mind.

Slade flicked an arm deprecatingly.

"You paid me well for it, you see! Five—ten pounds!"

Fitzbutler stood rigid, statuesque. Suddenly he bent at the knees.

"Say, when did this Insp—er—Sergeant Merrick die?" he drawled.

Slade saw that further pretense was useless. He grinned and nodded.

"All right. I'll allow you one there, Captain."

"I should think so! Cute—eh? What? But you're smart, Slade! Smarter than even Wentley gave you credit for, and that's saying something! So it was you who had the Charles guinea and who replied to my advertisement. Well, in ordinary circumstances I'd feel myself constrained to offer my congratulations. As it is——" He found his meaning expressed better by a shrug of the shoulders.

"As it is, Mr. Wentley's not here. And you are."

The suggestion could not be ignored. Fitzbutler closed one eye and lifted himself on his toes.

"I told Wentley he was a damned fool for clearing out, and what's more I still think so!"

"Maybe. But meanwhile. . . . ?"

Fitzbutler snapped at the bait.

"Yes, meanwhile I'm here. Quite!"

Slade took the horn-rimmed spectacles from his nose and let them dangle on his thumb. He had summed up his man pretty shrewdly.

"I believe, Captain Fitzbutler," he said, "that for some reason—quixotic or otherwise—both you yourself and Mr. Wentley feel your hands tied in this affair. But I find myself forced to contest the attitude you have adopted and are maintaining. The time has come—indeed, is past—when someone must speak. I'll ask you a question. Do you know anyone by the name of Palinsky?"

Fitzbutler did not hesitate.

"I do."

"And his Christian name. Fedor or Vladimir?"

The airman passed his cigar to and fro under his nose, scenting the aroma.

"Well, it depends upon which one of them you mean, of course."

"Good!" Slade nodded. "You know both, then?"

"No, unfortunately. I know of them."

Slade appreciated the difference, but did not pause over it. His next question followed close upon the other's reply to his former.

"Who d'you think—or know—killed Sir Dudley?"

Fitzbutler did not stampede. He just stuck one hand in his trousers pocket and jangled a few loose coins.

"I don't know—got no idea. Wish the devil I did!"

Slade watched him cross the room and, standing with his back against a book shelf, quietly continued his smoking.

"Does Wentley know?"

Fitzbutler shook his head.

"No. He knows as much as I do. No more—no less."

"D'you think it was one of the Palinskys?"

Fitzbutler came back.

"It's no use keeping it up, Slade. Honest, man, I don't know. Nor does Wentley. It's been a hell of an affair. The worst I've struck."

Slade didn't understand those last words, but, keeping them in mind, he stuck doggedly to the course he had set himself.

"D'you think Duncan knows?"

It was a try-out. Admittedly a shot in the dark. But, all the same, it grazed the bull's eye.

"Duncan! Why—— Heavens, man, d'you know about him too! I thought we'd been pretty wide awake, but—— Say, Slade"—in a new tone—"do *you* hap-

pen to know who did for Marsden? Is this here all bluff?"

Slade felt himself in deep waters.

"It depends upon what you mean by 'who.'"

Fitzbutler's mustache bristled.

"How do you mean?"

"Do you mean who shot him?"

Slade was not prepared for the sudden change that came over Fitzbutler at his remark. The hand holding the cigar dropped nervelessly to his side, and remained there, hanging limp. His eyes grew fixed in a second's space, and his face paled. He tried to speak, but succeeded only in moving his lips. No sound came from them.

AT LAST he forced himself by some almost superhuman effort of will to the side table and poured out a stiffish drink. He raised the glass in a trembling hand and drained it. Then he faced Slade, still pale, his eyes wide and unnaturally bright.

"How—how did you find that out? But there—there!" His voice faltered, husky with emotion.

"I had a thorough examination of the remains made. With no obvious clues, I wasn't leaving anything to chance."

Fitzbutler threw the remains of his cigar into the grate.

"Why—why are you telling me all this? Don't you realize—" his voice rose, and he clenched his fists tightly—"don't you realize you—you're giving away information to a suspected party?" His voice had more tone in it. The whisky was doing its work.

But Slade was silent, puzzled by this change. He frowned.

"I haven't suggested that you're a suspected party, Captain Fitzbutler."

"No—No, I mean——" The other stopped. He had seen his mistake.

Slade broke in sharply.

"You're hiding something, Captain. Is it something you're *afraid* of? Afraid to tell?"

What the answer might have been he was not given time enough to imagine. The door was at that moment flung open, and someone burst into the room.

"Duncan!"

The exclamation broke from Fitzbutler. Slade and the man who had at one time given him his instructions were staring at each other. The Secret Service man turned and addressed his first words to the airman.

"I came in through the garden," he said, in a low, yet full, ringing voice, pleasant-sounding, as if he was fully explaining his being there. "I saw the light as I came up." He turned back to Slade. "Well, old chap, and how's the world using you? Gave you a fright on Sunday—eh?"

He held out his hand. Slade took it.

"The usual dose or trials and tribulations, Sanger. Just now you're adding considerably to them yourself."

"I?"

"Well, you in conjunction with Captain Fitzbutler here, and Mr. Wentley—who's not here."

The Secret Service man's broad grin revealed a fine set of teeth.

"I don't care much for the mustache, Tony. Anyhow, to keep to the point, what's the trouble—Palinsky?"

"Partly." Slade wiped the mustache from his lip. "The other part's the murder of Sir Dudley Marsden."

Duncan's grin faded. He glanced aside at Fitzbutler, who had again moved over to the fireplace and stood leaning his shoulder against the carved oak mantelpiece.

"I knew this affair'd end up in a complete mess." He looked at Slade, and added in a lighter tone: "You shouldn't ask knotty questions, Tony."

A sudden light broke on Slade's bemused brain.

"You mean, Sanger," he exclaimed, "Fitzbutler's one of your crowd——"

His voice was drowned by a loud report, and the tinkling of falling glass from the window.

Duncan gave a cry, lurched heavily a couple of steps, and fell in a shivering huddle in the center of the room. In a flash Slade was at the light switch and had plunged the room in darkness. A bound took him to the shattered window, which opened on to the lawn at the rear of the house. There was a moon, and by peering closely he could make out some shadows deeper in tone than others. He had already drawn his automatic. Suddenly he saw a scurrying shape flit between a couple of trees at the far end of the lawn patch.

Twice his automatic barked, spilling its lead into the night. But the shape had melted into the vague darkness beyond the trees, and the light of the moon was uncertain.

Slade moved back from the window reluctantly and groped for the light switch again. When he pressed it down it was to see Fitzbutler kneeling by the stricken man's side.

"No good Slade—a clean plug. Right between the eyes."

Slade saw the spreading pool of blood, and turned his eyes away. He crossed to Fitzbutler's side and passed a hand over the still heart. From the dead man's breast pocket protruded a gray-blue paper. Slade took it out and glanced at it.

The paper contained several lines of wording in a language with which he was unfamiliar. Then it suddenly dawned on him. Russian! He turned the paper over, and started. In the top right-hand corner was scrawled a crude symbol—an eagle pecking at a skull.

Fitzbutler, who was looking over Slade's shoulder, suddenly gave vent to a sharp exclamation.

"God! They found him out, then! But he's tricked 'em with it all! He's done 'em! That paper—we've been working night and day for it. Here, give it to me, Slade. I know——"

"You know what?"

"What? Oh—er—Russian!"—feebly.

"Good! We'll be pleased to call you in when we want an interpreter, Captain."

Fitzbutler rose shakily to his feet, while Slade slipped the paper into his own pocket.

Chapter XII

THE RAT REAPPEARS

SLADE sat in his office and frowned. He was worried.

Fitzbutler had left that morning for Yarmouth, to bring Wentley back. Together, he had promised, they would make a statement. He had absolutely refused to say anything without consulting Wentley. But Slade was worried. What if Wentley and Fitzbutler were both in the Secret Service, he had his own job to attend to. And he did not know for sure that they were.

And then the rubies. . . . Being sold like that. But were they sold?

The one man who might have told Slade something definite was now silenced forever—Duncan. Duncan's operations had evidently been directed against Palinsky and the people with whom he was connected.

Still . . . Fitzbutler might say something soon. Meantime he had flown to Yarmouth. Unknown to him, Farrar had followed by an express train.

A tap at the door.

"Come in."

A constable appeared as if by magic.

"Lady and gentleman to see you, sir."

"Who are they?"

"They wouldn't say, sir. Said you'd see them. Shall I show them in?"

Slade hesitated.

"Yes—very well, then."

The door closed, to be opened a few seconds later to admit Gunter and Sadie

Marshall. Slade stared at them in surprise.

"'Morning, Tony."

Sadie drifted across the room and sat down in Clinton's chair, disturbing the official atmosphere with the heavy scent of Parma violets.

"'Morning, Sadie."

"I'll say it's a fine day, Mr. Slade."

"That's good of you, I'm sure, Mr. Gunter."

The Rat grinned.

"All right, Mr. Rat-catcher," he remarked cheerfully.

Slade glanced from one to the other, and he decided to put the question to the woman.

"Well, Sadie, who or what am I to thank for this unexpected pleasure?"

She answered up briskly.

"Palinsky!"

Slade gave Gunter a sidelong glance. The American was apparently at the moment studiously engaged in memorizing the pattern of the office wall-paper.

"Which one?" he flashed.

Slade had been prepared for some sort of surprise at his question, but he was disappointed. Sadie merely flashed him back a ravishing smile and lisped:

"Little Fedor, of course! Nice little Fedor—when he does what Sadie tells him."

"What's he been up to?"

"Pat'll tell you."

"Pat?"

She nodded toward Gunter.

"O! Yes, I see."

Gunter looked round. Not liking the look on Slade's face, he glared at the woman.

"Ready for me to open the show, then, Sadie? Waal, here goes, folks." He seated himself on the only spare chair the room boasted, and spread his long, angular legs out before him. "We've come to the conclusion, Mr. Slade—Sadie and me—that it'll be cheaper to cut our losses over this affair of the rubies. Oh, I know all right that you had me shadowed at the San Remo, and I can tell you now I kept my head pretty low a-purpose. All the same, working with Sadie, I had hopes of getting at least our expenses back, and perhaps a picking. I haven't now. No, sir. Those hopes are dead—pretty near mortifying by this time. I'm quitting this job, though it's me as says it."

"Very considerate of you, taking all these pains to lift some trouble off our shoulders!"

SADIE perked up her pretty doll's nose and glanced her defiance at the almanac over Clinton's desk.

"Heh, don't you flatter yourself, Sonny, it was for your sweet sake. It wasn't. It was because, whereas we thought we were out to trick a gang of crossbreeds—'screwsmen' you call 'em on this side—we bumped, instead, into one of those international gangs of high-class sinners who keep the paint on the map of Europe wet. We bumped—and we're bouncing off."

"Where to?"

"Paris. I've got a date with a pal—old college chum. Sadie, him, and me are going to do the Riviera this season. Trying out a change."

"H'm!" Slade sounded skeptical. The change was rather sudden and noticeable. "But why come and see me about it?"

Gunter drew his legs under his chair. Before he could speak Sadie had chirped in.

"Oh, Tony, don't you see? This case has been a failure for us. There was that horrid Chinaman Pat went to see." She shuddered daintily. "But it was you who balked us—balked Pat, I mean. Now we're clearing out we want to go with no blot on the 'scutcheon, as it were. We don't want you to cut up fresh at the last moment, make a noise, and set every cop in Paris after us. We'll talk now if you want us to. It's a deal, ain't it? We're taking some worry off your shoulders by removing our bright selves, and we naturally want you to take some off ours in return. Just let us go in peace."

"You've got it all mapped out well," observed the Yard man in his driest of tones.

She clapped her hands together, and laughed a gay little laugh—a laugh that had made many a man's head whirl.

"Of course we have! We're bright kids, always hoping for the best! And dear Uncle Tony's going to wish us the best—eh?"

She gave her little laugh again. Slade had to admire her cool performance. And there really was something about her that was undeniably charming. Still, Slade knew Sadie of old, and that made a great difference.

Slade shook his head pathetically.

"Sadie, I give you up. I'll not harass my poor brain any longer in trying to understand you."

Her carmine mouth wreathed in smiles.

"Silly Tony wouldn't," she purled, slipping off a glove dexterously.

She held up her left hand for inspection. On the third finger glittered a diamond ring. At this point Gunter commenced to whistle a jazz tune to himself, under his breath. Slade looked from one to the other.

"So you're pooling your chances, Sadie? Well, congratulations. But he'll take some holding. He's been a film star."

Sadie tilted her nose.

"I'll hold him all right—both hands!"

Both men laughed. Slade got up and walked to the door, then slowly slouched back to his chair, and, resting a knee on it, leaned with his arms folded across the back of it.

"When are you crossing?" he asked.

Gunter looked up and met the detective's gaze.

"Three days' time—Friday. Night packet."

"Well, you won't, unless you tell me something first."

"What's that?'

"The meaning of a letter you received from Palinsky. It was addressed from Palace Street, Lambeth."

"The letter you folks kept the night you pulled me and old Li?"

Slade nodded.

"Simple enough, Sonny. Palinsky had never seen me in his life—doesn't know he has now. I was living in Canning Town at the time. So, as I was wanting to see how the land lay farther afield, for placing a fake set of stones, Sadie, who had palled up with him on purpose, spun him a yarn about my being interested in rubies—real ones. He thought I was a buyer, and in the usual way of his gang sent his correspondence through a blind address. I forget how——"

"Yes, but how did Sadie come to link up with Palinsky?" put in Slade suddenly.

Gunter scratched at his jaw.

"Better ask her. See if she'll tell you."

Slade turned to the woman with the question in his glance. She shook her head pertly.

"There are some things which an inquisitive Uncle Tony should not ask of a—young lady. It's unduly embarrassing, as they say in books."

"I see!"

"I hope not!" she flashed back.

Slade turned to Gunter.

"Well?"

"As I was saying, I forget how the note ran. Something about 'Let you know in a few days. Nothing on now,' I believe. Of course, he didn't sign it. Sadie told him it wasn't necessary, if he didn't want to."

AS FAR as Gunter and the letter were concerned, the tale fitted in with the facts as known to Slade. But another point was not clear. The elder Palinsky had said the rubies were on the high seas. Why, then, if he had been speaking the truth, had the younger Palinsky been negotiating with a supposed buyer? Besides, the elder Palinsky had already paid out in cash ten thousand pounds. Would he have done that just for the sake of a blind if he was really out to sell the rubies for what they would fetch in a shady

market? Slade told himself it was not likely. Not in the least. It was straining credulity a point too far.

There was only one way to account for it, if it were so. The younger Palinsky must have been bluffing Sadie. But, then again, Sadie herself seemed pretty sure about it. And Sadie was generally right when she was pretty sure about a thing. Slade put the question, to make sure.

"Who's got the rubies, then?"

Sadie pushed a blond curl under her smart black hat.

"Little Fedor had them. But now——" She pouted and looked wistful. "Who knows?"

"I half believe you do," said Slade, with a note of grimness.

"Tony!"—shaking a finger—"you're being horrid. And Tony shouldn't, not when Sadie's leaving him for a long, long time."

Slade gave it up and got off his chair.

Barely five minutes had passed after he had seen them out of the office when Clinton walked in. He had followed them to the Yard. The news of their engagement was no news to him. He had already seen the ring, on the top of a bus in the Strand. However, he was quite willing to join his chief in a subdued chuckle. The incident was not without its touch of humor. He did not have much fresh to offer Slade concerning Palinsky. Certainly the man seemed more jumpy these last days, and had from all appearances succeeded in getting pretty thick with Sadie. But he still gave Clinton the impression of a man acting under orders to lie low and not expose himself—and others.

Slade told him of the reason for his late visitors' visit. Clinton raised his brows, but refrained from any comment. When he left it was with a strict injunction to keep an eye on Sadie and Gunter until Friday. Palinsky would, meantime, have to be left to slide.

At a quarter to twelve someone entered Slade's office without being announced. The detective heard the door pushed to, and looked up.

"Hullo, Abe!"

Detective Inspector Abraham Brawley, the chief officer of the Flying Squad, strolled over to Slade's desk and seated himself on a corner of it.

"The Chief's told me to come in here and have a confab. What is it, Tony, the Marsden case, still?"

Slade leaned back, arms outstretched, gripping the edge of the desk in front of him.

"More or less. Developments of same."

In silence each loaded his pipe and lit it from the same match. Slade took his case book out of the drawer of his desk and, point by point, quickly ran over the main features in the case. Then he settled himself to answer Brawley's questions. That completed, he once more outlined in brief the scope presented at the moment. He further mentioned the outcome of his own interview with the Chief.

THEY were engaged in an interesting discussion as to the probable fate of the Marsden rubies when once more the door was pushed open, and the constable who had announced Sadie and Gunter entered.

He handed Slade a sealed envelope and retired.

Brawley got up and walked over to the window as Slade broke the seal and drew out the contents. His face became suddenly grave, a vertical crease showing between his puckered eyes. Then he leaned forward, spread the sheet of handwriting out on the desk in front of him, and scanned it for the third time. Beside it, as he read, he placed the blue-gray sheet of paper he had taken from Duncan's pocket, the paper Fitzbutler had been anxious to obtain. Both sheets had been in the envelope, which had come from the Foreign Language Department. The original had been translated, and the translated note ran as follows:

In view of the fact that we were forced

to sink the British tramp steamer Bertha Ferriss, II, *since reported as missing, in order to fulfil our instructions regarding secrecy of movement, we are notifying you that we are shifting to Station No. 4. As a consequence, the* Tyrconnel *will remove to Yarmouth. We shall be awaiting communication from you as usual—on fourth day of schedule, Thursday of this week. If you have plan of Section Order Required, No. 5b, and can pass over, we shall leave Station No. 4 next night to meet the* Ivan Bohmovitch, *as per instructions. Sailing signal: two white—red above, green below.*

This on the vow of the Death Hawk.

The Death Hawk!

The mystified detective turned the original paper over slowly, and stared at the grim picture of the eagle, pecking at the empty skull.

"The vow of the Death Hawk!"

"What did it all mean? And the *Bertha Ferriss II*—sunk! He remembered a notice in one of the daily papers of the preceding week reporting the vessel as missing. But—sunk! He could give no reason for it, but a shiver ran down his spine. He recollected the disfiguring weals on Vladimir Palinsky's chest, and the burning light in the man's eyes. Then he suddenly saw a new significance in the Rat's flippant words—"one of those international gangs . . . who keep the paint on the map of Europe wet." He seemed to have forgotten Brawley for the moment. What had Wentley and Fitzbutler stumbled against? To go back farther, what had Duncan stumbled against? The same thing? Same people? Farther still—Sir Dudley Marsden?

He took down a Warwick file and opened it; drew out a sheet of paper. It was the letter he had obtained at the house in Palace Street, the sheet of paper on which he had first seen the hideous symbol of the eagle pecking at the skull—the Death Hawk!

The missive, which had been translated on the reverse, ran:

Tyrconnel *due—guns aboard. Instructions received and in order. Shall await communication.*

Yarmouth!

Wentley was on the scene, and so was Fitzbutler now. And the *Tyrconnel*—and Mr. Samuel Crump. The reason for the negotiations with the latter was more than hinted at in the substance of Duncan's letter. Slade's line of thought broke. . . . The rubies . . . Palinsky's evasive reply. Were the Marsden rubies on board the *Tyrconnel*? If not, then aboard the mystery boat that had sunk the *Bertha Ferriss II*? That would have to be—Slade's brain whirled dizzily at the thought—a battleship! *A Russian battleship?*

It was unbelievable! Unthinkable! The thing couldn't be, couldn't have been! England was not at war with the Soviet Republic. And yet. . . . The terms of the translated note were clear enough. There was no ambiguity. Had been "forced!" Forced! And the lives of English seamen had been lost—for what?

For the first time, also, he began to realize that the threats of the Palinskys might not have been altogether vain, idle attempts at bluster.

The *Bertha Ferriss II*. It was fiendish!

A hard, steely gleam lit Slade's eyes. Duncan had been murdered too! He was not forgetting that!

"There'll be another job for you this afternoon, Brawley. A pretty urgent job."

Brawley turned from the window and took the pipe from his mouth.

"And what's that, Tony?" he asked quietly.

"The Flying Squad'll have to raid the house of Mr. Vladimir Palinsky, in Wellsmere Road, Kilburn!"

(*Part III in the next issue of* SHORT STORIES)

DIAMONDS OF DEATH

By GARNETT RADCLIFFE

Author of "The Pink Shawl," "Son of the Wolf," etc.

Tricks of the West in the changeless East.

"THREE rupees, eight annas, Sahib," whined the tonga wallah.

"You go to hell," said Morton.

Nevertheless he paid. He wouldn't have submitted to the robbery of a taxi-driver in New York, but India seemed to have sapped his morale. She was like a too passionate mistress. Those burning days and fevered nights sucked the virility out of a man and left him lethargic, spineless.

Before going into the dâk-bungalow Morton cast a disillusioned glance at the too-familiar scene. God how he hated it! Acres and acres of flat green paddy-fields, a sandy road and some scattered water-wheels. From a little white-domed mosque in the distance came the chanting roar of the muezzin summoning the Faithful to prayer. Biblical—like the dimly remembered missionary texts of childhood. Yes, and devilish too, devilish in its arid monotony, its cruelty to animals, its prodigality of human life and its bland indifference to all that Western men called progress.

"Broadway," thought Morton with a stab of nostalgia. Now that it was too late he had realized that his going to India had been a terrible mistake. She had ruined him both physically and mentally. Drink, fever, insomnia—a fellow couldn't fight things like that. He'd become thin, sallow and vicious. He blamed his own deterioration upon the climate, forgetting that the episode that had entailed his leaving the States in the first instance had not been very creditable to his strength of character. But he certainly had gone fast downhill in the East. Weak men, like rotten fruit, deteriorate very quickly in a hot climate.

His boy, Abdul Hakim by name, had already carried the suit-cases containing the samples into the dâk-bungalow. He was of a caste lower than the proper bearer caste, a sly youth with a smallpox-pitted face. But Morton could not have paid the wages of a well-trained servant. Abdul Hakim was one of the enforced economies that added in no small degree to his detestation of India.

The ante-room was already occupied by another guest when he entered. A yellow-faced Englishman with a bald head and a profile like a bird of prey was stretched in a rorkee chair. He was badly shaved and his suit of tussore silk was crumpled and not too clean. A sundowner of almost neat whisky stood at his elbow and there was a bottle and siphon upon the table.

A box-wallah (civilian) like himself, Morton decided. If he'd been a Government man he wouldn't have been roughing it in this dust-bin of a dâk-bungalow. He'd have been messing with the District Commissioner Sahib, or living in his own camp with his own retinue of servants.

He looked a hard old buzzard. One of those mysterious Britishers one meets in the East who live on the border-line of respectability without any visible means of sustenance. Probably a remittance man, or a cashiered officer ashamed to go home.

"Evening," said the stranger. "Help yourself. There's no ice—naturally."

MORTON helped himself liberally. The yellow-faced man watched him mix his drink and settle himself in an adjacent rorkee chair.

"Travelling, aren't you? I saw your boy bringing your cases in. What is it? "Sports-gear, tailoring, jewelry, hardware?"

"Jewelry," Morton said. "For Chandiboys in Calcutta. Cheap Birmingham and Japanese stuff. I'm through with it. I've been working the Provinces right through the hot weather, and I haven't booked enough orders to make one worth-while consignment. It's this damned boycott. A white man can't do business in India these days."

"From the States, aren't you?"

"Yes, and I wish to God I'd never left them. I'm sick—sick of this damned country. I came out full of pep and grit and all the rest of it—and look at me now! Whisky and quinine, that's what I've got in my veins, not blood! Oh, hell!"

It was the song of the weak man who has let himself be beaten by his environment. Other fellows had had a tougher time than Morton, stuck it and made good. But he wouldn't admit that his own weaknesses were the main cause of his misfortunes. The climate, his health, the boycott—anything except the humiliating truth.

"Cheer up, young fellow," said the bald-headed man, who was obviously as nearly drunk as he could ever become. "Look at me and take heart. I came out twenty-five years ago, a subaltern in the Royal Scinde Horse, and I resigned my commission because my adjutant cheated at cards and wouldn't admit it. But I wouldn't go home; I had my pride and I stayed here. Railway inspector, journalist, tea planter, hotel commissionaire in Bombay —that's only to mention a few of the jobs I've done. But from this day forth and for ever more I'm a gentleman of leisure. I've made my fortune—I knew I would if I held on long enough. Now I'm going home on the next P. and O. that leaves Bombay with a first class passage and a cabin to myself. In other words, Edward Roebarrow, the black sheep of his family, has made good. *Veni, vidi, vici*—that's Latin for I've made my pile."

He broke off to pour the remainder of the whisky down his scraggy throat. He gulped the stuff with the shaking head and wry grimaces of an incessant drinker.

MORTON smiled sourly to himself. "Prelude to a request for a loan," was the name of this tune. Fancy anything so modern as the confidence trick reaching India!

"Made your pile, have you? That sounds jake. How about loaning me a thousand rupees? I want to go home too." There was sarcasm in his voice.

Roebarrow turned from where he was re-filling his glass. A long black cheroot was stuck in the corner of his mouth.

"I won't *lend* you anything," he said grandly. "What I will do though is I'll *give* you five thousand rupees to take you back to the States. I'll send it to you from Bombay. You just give me your address and I'll send it to you. You see, my dear fellow, the way of it is—" he bent over Morton and patted his arm in a confidential manner—"the way of it is I'm carrying a very large fortune on me, but it isn't easily convertible into ready cash. At the moment I'm—er—temporarily em-

barrassed. In fact, it seems ridiculous I know, but I haven't got enough money to take me to Bombay. Now I wonder if you—?"

The American closed his eyes. His head moved wearily from side to side.

"Nothing doing. I've been there before."

The bald-headed man drew back. A faint color tinged his yellow cheeks.

"You suspect a hoax? You think I'm trying to pull a confidence trick?"

"I don't think, I'm dead sure," Morton said with a grin.

ROEBARROW drew himself up with the awful dignity of the three-parts drunk. From the side-pocket of his tussore suit he pulled an ordinary cigar box. Opening it he extracted a small glittering object which he flipped carelessly across the table.

"You have a look at that and then apologize, young fellow."

Morton took up the small glittering object. A bit of blue glass—an imitation blue diamond. Not a bad copy though! No, by thunder, a very good copy indeed! Whatever—?

He walked to the window and scratched his initials upon the pane. The stone was real. Worth anything up to seven hundred pounds, he judged.

When he turned round Roebarrow had poured the contents of the cigar box upon the table. A score of good-sized diamonds pink and blue and white. Nuggets of frozen fire. Their refulgence seemed to brighten the room.

"What about it?" Roebarrow grinned.

"I apologize," Morton said. "You've a good fortune there right enough. Where in hell did you lift them?"

Roebarrow stirred the stones with his finger.

"Nice collection, aren't they?" he said complacently. "Pivers of Paris and New York have an agent in Bombay. I'm going to take them there. What should I ask? You're an expert in this line, aren't you?"

"Not in the real stuff. We don't handle it in Chandiboys. But Pivers will give you a fair price. Anyway, I shouldn't flash them round too much. If the niggers knew you had them you'd never reach Bombay alive—that's a cert."

"I agree with you there," Roebarrow said. He swept the stones into the cigar box and returned it to his pocket. "Have another drink?"

AN EXCITEMENT more potent than that given by alcohol was seething in Morton's veins as he resettled himself in the rorkee chair. Roebarrow was a lucky devil and no mistake. Morton did not know much about the market for real diamonds, but he reckoned that those stones must be worth anything up to a hundred thousand dollars.

"I suppose you picked the tree those came from quite bare?" he asked after a pause.

He saw the glowing end of the cheroot wag from side to side.

"I regret to say I did not," Roebarrow said. "I even doubt if what I have here represents the finest fruit. You see I hadn't much time to pick and choose. The priests were after me. I drilled three of the shaven devils and then took a header into the river. I preferred the crocodiles to being taken alive by the priests."

"It was a temple then?" Morton said in a low voice.

"Yes. The big snake-worshippers' mosque in Burra Jaitan. It's an independent native state in the northwest corner of the Punjaub. Devilish hard place for a white man to get into incidentally. There's not even a British resident. The Nawab runs the whole show. He's a product of Eton and Oxford who's rapidly reverting to the ways of his forefathers. They *say* he strangled his father. Think

of that! A fellow who got his blue for cricket strangling his father!"

"How did you manage it?" Morton asked. "Was it dangerous?"

"Dangerous!" Roebarrow gave a snort of laughter. "Yes, I think you may say it was dangerous. Those snake worshippers aren't nice people to play monkey tricks on. They're a Hindu sect, and when you've been in India as long as I have you'll know that the harmless Hindu is a myth. Crafty, revengeful devils! I'd rather come up against a Mohammedan than a Hindu any day of the week. That's why I'm in such a hurry to get to Bombay. I'll feel safe when I see the gangway of the P. and O. being raised and not before."

"You think they may be after you?"

"That's it. Those diamonds were part of the temple treasures, and it's a fairly safe bet the priests will have a try to get them back. They'll be out for revenge, too. Seems a pity if I'm to lose a fortune and get a knife in the back for want of a hundred rupees to take me to Bombay. Look here—if you'll lend me two hundred rupees, I'll send you seven thousand as soon as ever I've done business with Pivers' agent. I promise that on the word of an English gentleman. Damn it, man, you can't refuse. If those devils of snake worshippers did get me you'd feel like a murderer."

MORTON had taken his note-case from his pocket. His mind was in a whirl of excitement. He meant to get more than the seven thousand rupees promised out of this business. Why shouldn't he go to Burra Jaitan himself and pay a visit to the mosque? What Roebarrow had done, he could do too.

"I can't manage more than a hundred. Will that do?"

"Have to," Roebarrow said. "It'll mean travelling in a native compartment, but I'm used to that. Thanks awfully. I'll send the seven thousand to you care of Chandiboys in Calcutta as soon as ever I've seen Pivers' agent."

"That will be all right," Morton said. "I—I suppose you couldn't give me any idea about how to get to that mosque? It sounds a pretty good thing."

Roebarrow's cackle of laughter was like a dash of cold water on his half-formulated hopes.

"You're too ambitious, young fellow. It takes an old-timer like me—a chap who knows India as well as a taxi-driver knows London—to pull off a job of that sort. I don't suppose there's another white man in India could have done it. I went disguised as a *fakir*. Half naked and smeared with ash and carrying a praying-bowl. Begged my way on foot across the State. Sat outside the blessed mosque for three weeks waiting my chance. *You* couldn't do that! They'd twig you for a white man and turn you back at the frontier if they didn't murder you. Besides, after my effort the priests will be twice as much on the *qui vive* as they were before. I tell you I wouldn't go into Burra Jaitan again for a fortune."

He rose to his feet, picked up the whisky bottle and squinted at the contents.

"I'm going to bed. I'll have to make an early start tomorrow if I'm to catch the Bombay mail at Muttra. If you hear shots in the night you'll know that the snake-worshippers have come. I'll be ready for 'em! Edward Roebarrow can look after himself."

HE WAS laughing as he left the anteroom with an unsteady gait. It crossed Morton's mind as he watched him that if the snake-worshippers should chance to come they would not have much difficulty in disposing of Roebarrow. The man was fuddled with drink and would be certain to sleep like a log.

Sleep! He himself had never felt more wakeful in his life. The memory of those diamonds was working in his blood like a fever. They, or rather the money Pivers'

agent would pay for them, spelt freedom. Freedom to leave this accursed, dusty land where strong men withered like plucked flowers.

Never had his distaste for India been so strong. Going into his own room he found his servant, Abdul Hakim, adjusting the mosquito net over his camp bed. He had done it so carelessly that one side trailed to the floor while the other barely reached the bed. What else could you expect of a shiftless product of a Calcutta slum who pretended to be a Christian, spoke English and took service at eight rupees a month which was a sweeper's wage?

"Get out of it, you blasted fool," Morton snarled. "It'll be less trouble to do it myself. And don't start giving me any lip or I'll knock your head off."

Abdul Hakim with his sly insolent face shuffled to the door. He had no respect for white men, his master least of all.

"What time me bring it *chota hazri* (early tea)?" he paused to inquire.

"Eight o'clock and see that the cup's clean."

"Very good, sah."

A slam of the door announced the departure of the low-caste graduate of a missionary school. He was the new type of Indian, the semi-educated man who combines the vices of the East and West. Morton undressed and got into bed. Natural sleep was not to be hoped for, but he swallowed a quantity of a dope procured from a native chemist, of which opium was the principal ingredient. The stuff clubbed him into brief unconsciousness.

BUT at two o'clock in the morning he was awake again, unrefreshed and with nerves on edge. His throat was dry and his very skin semed to ache.

It's not good for a white man to be awake in the small hours of a hot Indian night, particularly not when his brain is already unstrung by the use of drink and dope. That's how the majority of the hot-weather suicides occur. Men of experience get up and drink tea and go for rides for they know the danger of thinking.

Morton, however, stayed in bed and thought. He thought of how he detested India and how he wished to return to the States. He thought of the vista of dusty years that must elapse before he could retire on a tiny pension, and felt his soul turn sick.

And then he thought of Roebarrow who was leaving the trap. Going home! To appreciate the meaning of those words you must say them to yourself on an Indian night when it is too hot to sleep.

That Roebarrow would send him the promised seven thousand rupees from Bombay, he didn't believe for a moment. Catch a fellow of Roebarrow's type giving money away! When he had given the loan it had been with the idea of eliciting information about Burra Jaitan.

Waste of money. He couldn't do what Roebarrow had done and there was no use thinking about it. The temple treasures were safe so far as he was concerned. Even if he had had the necessary knowledge of language and customs, he hadn't the nerve for such a dangerous enterprise.

Lucky old swine, Roebarrow! What would he do when he reached England with his fortune? Drink himself to death in a year most likely. Perhaps he'd never even reach Tilbury alive. He'd heard somewhere that those old sweats of Anglo Indians died like flies if they left their adopted land. If you stayed over a certain time in India you had to stay for ever.

THROUGH the thin dividing wall came a sound that rasped his nerves almost beyond endurance. Roebarrow was snoring. So that was how he guarded himself against the snake-worshippers! Probably the drunken fool had even neglected to bolt his door.

The sound of those complaisant snores whipped Morton's exasperation to the

point of madness. His jealousy of Roebarrow turned into a frenzy of rage. He had escaped the trap, he was going home, he had cheated him of a hundred rupees—and now he was driving him mad with that damned filthy snoring.

"I won't stand for that," said Morton through clenched teeth. "By God—"

He tore the mosquito net away and swung his bare feet to the ground. He wanted to dash into the next room and brain the snorer—brain him and take those diamonds for himself.

And hard on the heels of that thought came another. If he killed Roebarrow, the snake-worshippers would get the blame. The police would think the revengeful priests had tracked down the defiler of the temple, killed him and recovered their treasure. But Indians didn't brain people they disliked. They used knives or poison.

As it happened he had a native dagger in his kit. He had bought it as a curio in Lahore, little foreseeing to what use it would be put. It was a sharp, heavy affair. One stab with that would stop Roebarrow's snoring forever.

If he missed this chance he'd never get another as good. And, after all, Roebarrow would only be getting his deserts. He'd killed three priests to steal those diamonds—he deserved to die for that. It would be an act of justice, not a murder.

Morton's mind was definitely made up. He opened the suitcase and found the dagger. His fingers curled about the carved hilt. He balanced it in his hand and thought of where and how he must strike——

A moment later he was out on the veranda. The matting felt rough and prickly beneath his bare feet. The night was alive with the hum of insects and the croaking of frogs. From the village a few hundred yards down the road came the sound of native music. Probably a marriage feast of some sort. He glimpsed a bonfire and mysterious, flitting figures.

But there was nobody in the vicinity of the dâk-bungalow. The servants' quarters were at the back, and in front there was only the expanse of paddy-fields. Noiseless as a ghost he went two paces along the veranda and tried the door of Roebarrow's room.

AS HE had expected, it was not locked. The Englishman must have been too fuddled to observe even that elementary precaution. And this was the fool who had boasted about how he would be ready for the snake-worshippers!

The moonlight which flooded the room showed Morton the bed and the sleeper. There was no mosquito net; evidently Roebarrow was so well salted by his years in India as to be able to dispense with one. He was lying on his back with his head flung back and his mouth open. The jacket of his sleeping suit was unbuttoned for the sake of coolness and his chest exposed.

Something told Morton that if he hesitated his nerve would go. He set his teeth, leapt across the room and stabbed viciously downwards. The sleeping man gave a convulsive movement. His eyes opened and fixed themselves on Morton's face in an expression of intense surprise.

"You——"

Then his head fell back and his arms dropped limply at his side. Morton's aim had been true. The dagger had transfixed Roebarrow's heart and he was dead.

For an instant Morton stood quite still staring down at his victim. A wave of terror swept over him. What had he done? He was a murderer. Suppose they caught him? He put his hand to his throat as if he could already feel the noose.

BUT then his nerve returned. If he kept his head there need be no danger. He would tell the police how Roe-

barrow had robbed the snake worshippers' temple, and how he was fearful of the priests' vengeance. They need look no further than that for a motive for the crime. An emissary from the temple had crept into the dâk-bungalow, stabbed the Englishman and taken the diamonds. That was the obvious solution.

Now for the diamonds. He slid his hand under the pillow, but to his surprise the cigar box was not there. Had Roebarrow hidden it for fear of the snake-worshippers? But then, glancing round, he saw it lying in full view upon the dressing-table. The Englishman must have been even more fuddled with drink than he had supposed!

Anyway, it made it all the easier for him. He caught up the box and turned to leave the room. Stay, there was that dagger. It would be safer to remove it also. If the police found it they might trace the ownership. He set his teeth and nerved himself to drag the implement of death from Roebarrow's chest.

A minute later he was back in his own room. Glimpsing his face in his mirror he saw that it was deathly white, and that his hair was as wet as if he had been bathing. He was shaking uncontrollably. No matter, a drink would soon put that right.

HE WRAPPED the dagger in a piece of paper and placed it in a writing-case of which he had the key, where it would be safe from Abdul Hakim's prying eyes. Then he helped himself to a stiff jolt of whisky. He ceased to tremble and felt a comforting glow as the fumes of the spirit crept round his brain.

He'd done it! *He* was going home with a fortune, not Roebarrow! And it had been so simple too. Far simpler and far less dangerous than robbing the Burra Jaitan temple.

He took the cigar box and slid back the lid. A tiny black form reared from the cotton wool and fastened itself to his hand. He gazed at it in stupid bewilderment. It was a *krait*. The smallest and most venomous snake in India. It measures barely six inches, is about as thick as a lead pencil, and has a bite that is fatal unless remedies can immediately be applied.

Saving whisky, which is not potent enough to counteract the *krait's* poison, Morton had no remedies. He knew himself doomed. So this was the snake-worshippers' revenge! They *had* entered Roebarrow's room earlier in the night. They had taken back the diamonds and left the *krait* in their place. And *he* had been taken by the trap!

He must get help. He rose to his feet and instantly an agonizing cramp twisted his muscles. He staggered and fell, never to rise again——

THE principal business of Pivers' agency in Bombay is not done behind the plate-glass and mahogany frontage of their imposing office in Princess Drive. It is done by a Parsee buyer who sits on the pavement in the bazaar. He does the buying from the natives which is highly profitable. He does a good trade, for it known all over India that he gives a fair price and has no dealings with the police.

Very late on the evening of the following day a sly-looking native youth with a smallpox-pitted face crept up to this Parsee. He whispered that he had diamonds he wished to sell. The Parsee beckoned him into the filthy little shop where he transacted business.

The diamonds were in a cigar box. One by one the Parsee examined them. Then he put them back in the cigar box and handed it to Abdul Hakim.

"I only buy real stones. Those are very clever imitations, but they are not diamonds. They are colored rock crystals cut and polished to look like real diamonds. It is an old trick. Many people are deceived by them because they can scratch glass."

Abdul Hakim's mouth fell open.

"But they were stolen from the snake-

worshippers' temple in Burra Jaitan by a white man. I heard him tell the story myself!"

"Then you heard him tell lies," the Parsee said calmly. "There is *no* snake-worshippers' temple in Burra Jaitan. I know the place well. It is a Mohammedan town near Abbotabad. You must come from the south or you would have realized the story could not be true."

"I come from Calcutta," Abdul Hakim muttered. He took the cigar box and shuffled slowly from the shop.

SO THE story he had overheard Roebarrow Sahib telling his master had been all lies! That was the worst of being educated at a missionary school. They taught you geometry, but left you as ignorant of your own country as a white man. He had fallen for Roebarrow's hoary confidence trick as easily as Morton himself. And, like Morton, he had succumbed to the temptation of easy wealth.

The finding of a *krait* in a semi-comatose state in the go-down behind the servants' quarters had given him his bright idea. He had captured the creature by means of a forked stick and had placed it in one of the empty cigar boxes which abounded in the back quarters of the dâk-bungalow. Then he had slipped in to Roebarrow's room and substituted it for the one containing the fake diamonds.

His plan for directing suspicion to the snake-worshippers from Burra Jaitan had been cleverer than Morton's. What more probable than that they would employ one of their own gods to exact vengeance? Believing himself quite safe, and eager to convert the diamonds into money as soon as possible, he had left the dâk-bungalow in the early hours of the morning without waiting to ascertain the results of his trick.

But now he no longer felt safe. There were no snake-worshippers to be suspected; the police would be searching elsewhere for the murderer. Without money or friends in Bombay, he could not evade them for long. He must get rid of the damning evidence of the diamonds, bury them or throw them into the sea. But barely had he taken that resolve when he heard a voice summoning him to stop, and turning round saw two Sikh policemen coming straight towards him.

RADIO WARNING FOR S. S. "ZINNOA"

By CAPTAIN FREDERICK MOORE

Author of "Yellow Guns," "What Price Roast Beef," etc.

A dramatic moment on the high seas.

FOR a Dutchman's ten cent harmonica, I'd throw the three of 'em into the hold in irons," said Captain Ludensen, as he looked over his glasses at the youthful radioman of the *Zinnoa*. Having just read a message from the Manila police, informing him that his three passengers were members of the gang wanted for two murders in the robbery of a Manila jeweller, the skipper was in a mood for drastic action.

"But they don't want the men to know they're suspected of being aboard, sir," said Radioman Eddy. He was a lean-jawed youngster, with gentle blue eyes, a

wisp of hair that dropped down on his forehead and gave him a look of dangerous pugnacity. His right arm, bare to the shoulder by reason of his sleeveless shirt, had tattooed on it a red and blue American flag, and his left arm, a green snake with red eyes, obscured somewhat by freckles which resembled overgrown bubbles blown from cup grease.

"No, I suppose not," agreed Captain Ludensen sadly. He was not very old himself, having recently been made master of the twelve-knot freighter, grinding up the Pacific for San Francisco, eight days after pushing half of Manila Bay out through the Boca Grande. "It's all very well for the Manila police to tell me what they want and what I ought to do, and meet cutters by standing in for Honolulu to take off jailbirds and murderers when I'm trying to save the last ounce of coal. Owners take the passage money, and what am I doing off my course and how long have the Manila police been paying my wages, and what am I doing taking passengers that the police want anyhow?" He sucked thoughtfully at his dry pipe, but gave over when it whistled, his stern eyes on the message Eddy had shown him a minute before. They were in the radio house abaft the funnel on the boatdeck.

"The passengers won't give us any trouble—if they don't know about that, sir," said Eddy. He felt some how to blame for having been the means of calling to the attention of his skipper something that was mean, dangerous, and expensive to the owners. But the youngster got a kick out of being in on something exciting. Three men wanted for murder, and they not knowing the police had traced them to the *Zinnoa!* It would be in the newspapers, including perhaps, picture of Radioman Eddy with nine-dollar cap a little on one side. The man who did the waterfront for the *Examiner* was a friend of Eddy, and always trying to work up something exciting out of quiet passages, transforming "Wind, force 4" from the log into "Freighter Fights Typhoon and Wins Grim Sea Battle." Well, here was something that a reporter could spread himself on.

"We've got to see that they don't know about it," said the skipper. "Not that they can get away—but they'll want to know what you're getting. Put your duplicate of this in the chart room, because they'll likely try to dig around in here."

"Swift has been up a lot," said Eddy. "He watches me, I know now, just to see if I've chilled off on him. Thought he was just being sociable. Now I know why Dr. Anson always gives me a sharp look when I go down to meals."

"A crook calling himself a doctor!" snorted Ludensen. "I call that gall! For a raisin out of a fireroom pie I'd wrap his chin around his collar button and tuck in the ends!" He made the empty pipe whistle, and showed his teeth over the amber stem.

"Charlett has been up once or twice," Eddy went on, when he had looked out toward the after ladder in the failing light of evening, "and I remember now that he's always asked just when we'd be where I couldn't reach Manila with this set of mine. I told him this noon that I'd already passed the range where I could send to Manila."

LUDENSEN turned away from the yellow slip he had studied so carefully. "So that's it, eh? They've been worried about what we could tell Manila if we got any queries on 'em. Good work, Sparks! They don't care so much what we *know*—but they do care what we *tell* the police."

Eddy smiled shyly. "I didn't tell Charlette that because I was smart, sir—I wanted to stop him quizzing me. I didn't suspect anything then."

But Captain Ludensen was not listening. Again he was going over the hateful words on the message form. ". . . . if they find they are known by you likely to be dangerous. . . . prefer they believe got away. . . . two of gang in custody think your three still in islands. . . . armed and

desperate so do not hesitate kill if necessary. . . . keep them in belief not suspected so be friendly and pretend you are ignorant of their records. . . ." He swore under his breath and tucked the message into an inner pocket. "Don't you say a word to anybody about this. We don't want anybody caught glaring at 'em, and we don't want the ship full of whispers. Understand? You and I youngster, alone on this. And you play soft with 'em, too, because I wouldn't put it past this gang to kill you if they thought they could stop messages going out about 'em. Pack your gun, keep it loaded, shoot any of the rats that try anything smart on you, and have that chain blackjack handy. And lock your door when you're asleep. You're the most important man aboard to 'em—they may try to buy you up. If they make any such play, sell out to 'em. Make 'em think they're in control of what I get—or don't get from you—and we're all safe."

"Yes, sir," replied Eddy. "I've been suspicious, as I said, that I was too popular with Swift. And Charlett is beginning to get sugary. Told me today that he's expecting an important message from Manila —I'll say he is!"

Captain Ludensen got out of the chair before the instruments, and stood for a minute in the open door, sucking the evening through the amber stem. "If we could play some sort of game on 'em," he said. "But I'm not up to such business. They'll most likely try some game on you —such as give the police, if they ask for descriptions of our passengers, a run around the mulberry bush. They didn't come aboard here without some plan for slipping through the hands of the police in 'Frisco."

"We'll have to wait and see what they try, sir."

"There goes the grub bell," remarked Ludensen, pulling at his cap with a determined jerk when he heard the saloon steward battering his way around the saloon deck with a brass plate. "I'll send your chow up, and say you're standing by for weather reports. That'll make 'em suspicious, and you can look for something from 'em before long." He stepped over the coaming, and turned back to look severely at the young radioman. "Can I trust you to see that they don't bash you up and try to cut me off from having a good operator aboard."

"Mr. Eckers would have to take a hand when needed here, sir," said Eddy.

"You know how much good Eckers is. He draws extra pay as second mate who can send and receive. I've no kick against that, if he can get money for his ability to take four words a minute, and has trouble spelling coffee." Ludensen was severe.

"Yes, sir." Eddy was fishing out a leather covered piece of chain that might make a good blackjack in case of mutiny.

"I could keep passengers off the boat deck and away from you," Ludensen went on, thinking as he talked. "If I do, they'll smell a dead whale. Listen at 'em if they want to come up here and talk, but I don't want you to be buried at sea—not with all that nice Japanese tattooing. Besides, I know your old man. I could have the Chinkie boy put some of his *bhang* or opium or something like that in these gunmen's tea and when they waked up they'd rattle like a hardware store at the tail end of a cyclone—and if the police are slightly cockeyed about our passengers, or one of 'em, it would take me the rest of my life getting a berth in a ship. Mind now, use brains! You may have to find out if they've got any by putting that can opener in your hand behind an ear. I'm going down and play fool with the passengers while I do some heavy thinking. Don't let anybody kill you—that's orders."

"Yes, sir. I don't want to kill anybody, but——"

"But you've got a girl in Sausalito, and it's up to you to get home. Snakes and butterflies on your arms! Huh! Walking picture book! If you're tough, now's the time to be it." And Captain Ludensen hurried aft to the ladder for the well deck on his way to the dining saloon.

II

EVENING, Sparks."

It was Mr. Charlett. He appeared in the open doorway out of the darkness, and looked in on Eddy, who having finished the supper brought to him from the pantry, was leaning back in his swivel chair, his feet across the radio room on the top of his bunk.

"Good evening," replied Eddy. He took his feet down and swung the chair so he faced the door. His loaded revolver was in a back pocket under an unbuttoned jacket, and ready to his left hand was the chain blackjack covered by a shirt on the head of the bunk.

Charlett, a man about thirty, was dressed in a smartly tailored gray suit. He had a steamer cap of the same fabric aslant on one side of his head, but there was nothing about him that suggested the thug. His manner was silky, his voice pleasant and ingratiating, his brown eyes soft with a suggestion of always peering about as if he were a trifle near sighted. He stepped over the brass topped coaming of the door, walked in, and lifted the hook which held the duplicate messages. "You don't mind if I look these over?" he asked, smiling aside to Eddy.

"Help yourself," said Eddy carelessly. Ase he had hidden the police message in the skipper's rubber boots in the little chart room off the bridge, there was nothing but weather reports and time signals recorded in the duplicates which Charlett examined.

"You say you can't get Manila now—out of range?" asked Charlett, when he had returned the hook file to its nail.

"Only by having some vessel nearer to Manila relay for me, as I told you, sir," replied Eddy. "Want to file something?"

"Yes. Nothing very important. You know, I've an idea that one of the five men wanted by the police is aboard this steamer." Charlett looked straight down into Eddy's eyes.

"Say, mister! You don't mean that?" The young operator was properly startled, shocked, and not a little alarmed.

"Of course I mean it. Now, I want you, Sparksey, to help me play a little game. Of course, I don't believe that Dr. Anson is a fugitive from justice."

"Then you mean Mr. Swift?"

Charlett nodded. "I'm afraid so. But I'm not sure. We could find out—if you'd like to try it with me."

"How can I do anything about it?"

"Keep a secret for me."

"What secret?"

"That the message you'll give to the skipper down in the saloon where they're finishing dinner, did not come from me. I'll go back before you go down, and then you deliver."

"But it'd get me in trouble to give the skipper a false message. Felony. I'd be taking a chance, and——"

CHARLETT broke in. "No chance at all. I'll take the chance. If I'm right, Swift gets caught in 'Frisco—if I'm wrong, there's no harm done. And look here!" Charlette laid a thousand dollar banknote on the desk beside Eddy. That's for you—no matter what happens, Sparks."

"You want me to give a message to Captain Ludensen that says Swift is a criminal? That it?"

"No, no!" said Charlett. "Nothing like that. Just something that'll worry him—if he's the man I think he is. I'll watch him and see how he acts when the skipper gets the message."

"But the skipper won't read out a message he gets from the police—or thinks is from the police."

"I'll attend to that. Are you on for a thousand bucks. I want you to promise that

you'll keep your mouth shut, no matter what happens."

"I'd have to, wouldn't I, if I lied about the message—or get in a jam?"

Charlett nodded in solemn agreement. "If you start the business, you've got to go through with it. And we've got to get going if we're going to try it on."

Eddy picked up his message pad and pencil. "Shoot the works! I'm willing to take a chance." He slipped a duplicating carbon between the sheets.

"Date it now, put in the proper letters and numbers. Fix my words up any way you want to so they'd sound official. This is from the chief of police, Manila—and it's got to be good."

"I'll make it so." Eddy glanced at the bulkhead clock for the time. Then he put down the preliminary matter, and wrote, "To Master, S. S. *Zinnoa.*"

"One of the Randy gang wanted for robbery and murder aboard your vessel," dictated Charlett. "Have information he sailed as passenger. Police will board you San Francisco with port doctor. Have no description. Will report later. Do not answer."

"That's a little different than I expected, sir," said Eddy with a grin. "It hurts nobody, but it does put all three of you passengers under suspicion."

"Exactly!" agreed Charlett. "And if none of us happens to be wanted, there's no special harm done. That wouldn't convict anybody of murder."

Eddy signed the name of the Manila police chief. "But it could get me in trouble. Don't you fall down on me and tell the skipper. I'm guilty of forgery or something, you know, and I could lose my license and be shot into the jug."

"I'm behind you. No matter what happens, don't you admit I had anything to do with this. If you let me down, I'll be in a mess myself, so we're in together on this business—understand?"

Eddy pocketed the banknote. "But what if Swift is the criminal? He's likely to make trouble."

"How can he get off the ship?" demanded Charlett.

"He can't. But he might shoot things up."

"That's the last thing he'd do, want to make a row," objected Charlett. "He'll try to keep everybody from suspecting he's the man, won't he? You would, wouldn't you?"

"I'd keep my mouth shut," agreed Eddy.

"Get down right after me," advised Charlett. "I'm supposed to be up to my cabin for a special brand of cigars I carry. Nobody knows I came up here." He moved away in the darkness, and went down to the saloon deck by the side ladder, instead of going aft to the ladder which was near the welldeck ladder to enter the saloon from the after door.

EDDY sat for a few minutes thinking. "A thousand dollars! Who'd give that much to play a little game—to find out if Swift is a criminal? Last thing in the world you'd expect a criminal to do—want a faked message like this one. Unless the police made a mistake, and Charlotte's not one of the wanted gang. But a thousand dollars! Only a crook would pay that! And what the devil does Charlett want to crack such a message on the skipper for, when nobody but the skipper and myself knows there are three crooks aboard us? Boy, this is going to be good!"

He glanced at the clock, then pulling on his uniform cap, he buttoned his jacket and started down for the saloon with the fraudulent message.

III

RADIO, sir!"

Eddy handed over the message to Captain Ludensen, who was sitting at the head of the table, Dr. Anson on his right, and Swift and Charlett on his left toward the center of the saloon.

The skipper was lighting a cigar. His cap was on the table at the far end. He had just finished his small black coffee,

and the saloon lights were on brightly, for night had settled down over the ship.

"Weather, Sparks?"

"Yes, sir."

Dr. Anson, rotund, red-faced, and lazy, looked up from his dessert so quickly that his *pince-nez* glasses nearly jumped from his nose.

Swift lifted his head and stared at Eddy, and gasped. A man, bald to the back of his neck, thin faced, large nosed and with shrewd gray eyes, he had a habit of catching his breath noisily, as if he suffered from some affliction similar to athsma. He wore clean whites usually, but tonight he was clad in a suit of dark seersucker.

Charlett pretended not to notice Eddy, or the fact that a radiogram had arrived. He had a cigar on the table beside him, and a match, while he finished his desert hastily.

Captain Ludensen took the yellow slip of paper and unfolded it. He got to his feet and moved to a bulkhead lamp to get the light to bear upon the paper, while Eddy slipped out to the well deck and cilmbed the ladder.

Twice the skipper read the message. Then he tucked it under the edge of his uniform jacket. "Well, gentlemen, I'll be taking a look round the bridge. I'll be back again in a few minutes, if you want to try another go at the cards."

"Is that radiogram from the police?" asked Swift, his voice a trifle tense, as he leaned forward over the table.

Captain Ludensen stared across at the man. "Police! What the devil would the police be sending me anything for?"

"They might," said Swift. "I've an idea that there's somebody aboard here they might want to inquire about."

"What's that?" demanded Charlett.

"Nonsense, Swift!" said Dr. Anson. "Certainly, you don't mean to infer that any of—of—us passengers—are criminals?"

"I don't infer anything, Doc. I just asked the skipper a question. If the police are asking anything, we're entitled to know."

"How did you come to suspect that I might have a message from the police?" asked Ludensen, still surprised at Swift's question.

"Because I believe there's a criminal aboard."

"You must be joking!" exclaimed Dr. Anson, looking over his glasses at Swift.

"I'm not joking. One of us passengers is under suspicion."

Charlett got to his feet. "That's a damned insult—to me and the doctor!"

"I'm a passenger, too," said Swift, rising, and standing away from Charlett, whose attitude was hostile. "And I don't intend to be under suspicion if it happens that——"

"Do you think I'm a criminal?" demanded Dr. Anson hotly. "Why, I'll not stand for that line of talk!"

"No, I don't believe you're the man wanted at all, Doctor."

"Thanks, awfully! The hell you say!" retorted Anson.

"Now, gentlemen," put in Captain Ludensen. "We can't have trouble about this. I don't believe that any of you are criminals. Why should I?"

CHARLETT lifted a shaking hand. "But Swift has said he don't believe Dr. Anson is a crook—and he certainly ain't saying he's one himself. That makes me out the man he's talking about. And I won't stand for that!" He swung to Swift. "You take that back! Nobody's going to make any cracks like that about me here, or anywhere else. Not you."

"Cool off!" retorted Swift. "This whole thing hangs on what's in that radio you got, Captain Ludensen. Am I right? Are

the police asking about your passengers?"

"Tell him—for all of me," said Charlett. "I want this cleared up, here and now."

"Now, wait a minute!" objected Dr. Anson. "You two can't tell the captain of this ship what to do. That's no way to talk! We're all gentlemen together here, so——"

"That won't go with me!" broke in Charlett angrily. "I'm the man under the guns here, and I'm going to have satisfaction. Swift just let you out of it, and it's easy for you to talk, but I'm accused of being wanted by the police. I'm entitled to know where I stand, and all this gentlemen together stuff is the bunk."

Dr. Anson waved his hands as if he considered the case hopeless, while Charlett stood glaring at Swift.

"Is there anybody here who objects to having my message read out?" asked Captain Ludensen. "It's private, of course, but if you want to clear something up—and it is unpleasant, I'll admit—you can hear what I got."

"Read it, sir," said Dr. Anson.

"Sure, let's have it!" agreed Swift.

"I want to hear it," said Charlett. "But I can't have anybody saying I'm a criminal around here."

"All right, I'll read it," said the captain. He pulled the message from under his blouse, backed up to the bulkhead lamp, and read: "One of Randy gang wanted for robbery and murder aboard your vessel. Have information he sailed as passenger. Police will board you San Francisco with port doctor. Have no description. Will report later. Do not answer. And it's signed by the chief of police."

"Let 'em board at San Francisco, that's all I've got to say," said Dr. Anson.

"That doesn't worry me any," said Swift.

"Nor me," said Charlett. "And, Mr. Swift, I'll make you settle for trying to make all hands in this steamer think I must be the wanted man. I'll have you in court for slander."

Swift laughed harshly. "Is that so! Slander, eh? All right. I'll give you something worth while to take to court." He turned to the others. "Gentlemen, I say now that Charlett is the man who's wanted. I'll bet all the cash I've got on me. He's caught, that's all—and he can't get away."

Charlett only scowled at Swift, apparently too mad to trust himself with words.

"Now, how do you happen to be so sure, Mr. Swift?" demanded Captain Ludensen. "That's a pretty serious thing for you to say."

"He's been watching around the radio-house for days, that's why," said Swift. "I've had my suspicions, never mind why, in other ways. His room is next to mine, and I haven't slept any too well."

"That's something to hang a man for," sneered Charlett.

"I'm no fool, I'll tell you that," replied Swift. "And I happen to know a few things that I didn't see or hear aboard this steamer, either. You were being watched in the Manila Hotel, and I heard a few remarks about you there—just what the servants said—when they didn't know I was listening."

CHARLETT shrugged his shoulders, and turned away. But he did not go far. He swung back to Swift, and demanded, "Are you a detective?"

"I'm not. But you came near being grabbed in Manila. You booked and bought a ticket for a Hong Kong boat—*Ta Ming*—and then switched to the *Zinnoa* at the last minute with a ticket you'd bought the week before. You played a damned clever game. You came out in the police boat after we'd left the dock. Police boat! That was slick! Escape from Manila in the police boat!"

"You win," said Charlett quietly.

"You mean that Swift's right—you're the wanted man?" demanded Captain Ludensen.

"I'll say he's a cool customer!" blurted Dr. Anson.

"There's nothing cool about it," said Charlett. "I know when I'm caught. I can't get away."

"Put him in irons! Lock him up!" cried Swift. "My life's not safe with him running around after what I've said about him!"

"I'm not going to hurt anybody," said Charlett. "You ain't to blame, Swift, for that message. I thought I was safe away, but I bungled somewhere. I'm one of the Randy gang—and I'll get the rope—if they catch me!"

As Charlett talked, his voice grew higher, and acquired a ferocity that approached the hysterical. As he finished he was waving his hands at the men near the head of the table. When he had finished, he turned in his tracks, bent forward, and sprinted for the stairway to the saloon deck.

"Stop him!" cried Dr. Anson, to nobody in particular.

Swift bounded in pursuit. "He'll hide!"

"We've got to know where he is!" said Dr. Anson to Ludensen. "You don't want him hiding around the ship——"

Captain Ludensen ran after Swift. Charlett had passed through the little social hall at the head of the stairs, and darted through the door to the deck on the starboard side.

Swift was close after him. Already on deck, the door open behind him, Swift ran a few steps along the deck, the pounding of his shoes plainly heard by Captain Ludensen.

There was a sharp cry. Just as Captain Ludensen reached the doorway, Swift bounded back, yelling, "Man overboard! Over the rail—he jumped!"

There was a call from the bridge. Bells jangled in the engine room. The motion of the vessel altered a little as the helm was put over and she struck the swells from a different angle. The mate could be heard yelling about a boat, and there was a rush of feet up ladders from the foredeck.

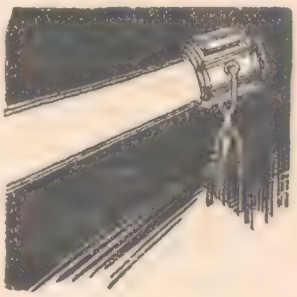
Captain Ludensen bolted for the bridge, leaving Swift and Dr. Anson on the saloon deck, peering aft into the white road of the steamer's wake.

WHY in the devil," whispered Captain Ludensen in the darkness between bridge and radio-house while the searchlight sliced the air astern, "did you put the symbol letters of the Manila Observatory on a message from the chief of police?"

"Because I wanted you to know it was faked, sir," replied Eddy. "Charlett passed me a thousand dollars. Who's overboard?"

"Charlett! Here's a do! All right. Sparks—mind yourself!" and Ludensen dashed back to the bridge.

Mr. Eckers was to take the boat away. There was no sea running, but the *Zinnoa* began to roll lazily as she lost her way. With the wheel over, the old wake was coming abeam now, faintly visible as spots of froth under the oval of luminosity from the searchlight's beam.



Then the engines backed, and the mate gave the word to lower away. The falls began to whine. Cinders dropped from the smoke which was curling about the funnel top. The boat's crew unhooked, and the blocks of the falls began thumping regularly on the side of the vessel. Firemen gabbled in the fiddly. There was a low murmur of voices from the crew forward.

Eddy went back to the radio-house, turned off the lights, and stood in the open door, watching the boat as it trailed the long sweeps of the light on the water.

The *Zinnoa* had made a loop and was slowly moving down on a course parallel with her old track, and ahead of the boat, seeking with the light for some trace of Charlett. Eddy moved to the side of the house, so he could look aft and watch Mr.

Eckers. Now and then the second mate could be heard swearing.

The boatdeck at times was illumined by the glare of the searchlight overhead. It was not a direct light, but a ghastly whiteness along with a blinding of the eyes momentarily, when stays and mastheads, covered boats and davits, suddenly took shape out of blackness and threw gigantic shadows at crazy angles that changed with the slow roll of the steamer and again faded into nothingness.

Eddy was looking aft when there was one of these flashes of light that left the deck all the darker when they ended. He caught a crouching figure under one of the boats near the top of the after ladder. It was not so much that he saw the man, as his eyes caught the image when the darkness assailed again.

"That's Swift!" he breathed. And Eddy moved round to the other side of his house, so as to be out of the track of Swift if he was coming to call.

The searchlight was playing now along the starboard bow. The engines were turning at dead slow. And Eddy, keeping his eyes accustomed to the gloom aft, watched the advance of Swift. He took cover at each boat, then moved ahead when he felt safe from any glare overhead.

Swift gained the open door of the radio-house. Eddy looked round the corner, just under an open porthole near the door.

"There, Sparks?" Swift asked the question in little better than a whisper.

Eddy stuck his head through the porthole into the house, and answered, "Hello! Who's that!" Then he pulled his head out, reached his hand inside with a battery pocket flash, and touched the button for the least bit of a second. His bunk was below his hand inside.

"No light!" said Swift. "Don't turn on the light—I just want to say a word!"

EDDY'S hair was curling along the back of his head. In the bit of light he had snapped on Swift, the radioman had caught the glint of steel in Swift's hand.

Eddy stuck his head inside again. "I'm turned in," he said. "What do you want?"

Swift stepped over the coaming of the door. Eddy pulled his head out, reached for the chain blackjack in his back pocket, and stepped to the front of the house, close to the jamb of the open door.

Swift had made for the bunk. He fumbled around, puzzled at not finding the radioman in it. Eddy reached in around the door an threw on the switch which controlled the lights of the room.

Swift swung round in the glare. There was a knife in his right hand. His eyes were blinded by the unexpected brilliance, and he was astounded to see that Eddy was outside the door. He lifted his blade, and leaped at Eddy.

The radioman stepped aside, and as Swift came plunging out, the chain blackjack curled about the back of his neck. His knees doubled and he piled up on the deck just forward of the door.

"Sparks! Put that damned light out! Who can see anything with that blasted door open? What the hell're you trying to pull off? An illumination of Brooklyn Bridge or something?"

"Yes, sir! Right away, sir!"

"You'll never make a seaman out of that lad," Eddy heard the mate saying. "He needs a job in a pickle boat in some sporting park!"

Eddy reached in and threw the switch. There was a yelp from the whistle that shook everything. The boat was being recalled.

"And a damned good thing for the taxpayers to lose him," came the booming voice of Captain Ludensen from the bridge. "It'll save rope to hang him!"

The searchlight swung inboard, and shifted its glare down the side of the ship to illumine the falls for the returning boat. Mr. Eckers began to bawl to keep the blasted thing out of his eyes. The *Zinnoa* was moving up a little under a slow bell to cut down the distance the boat had to be pulled.

All that Eddy caught in the beginning of

a second. But there was more for him. The searchlight with each roll of the vessel, splashed inboard a little. And in one of the splashes, Eddy, who was about to get a piece of line from his quarters to tie up the arms of Swift, stopped dead. He already had his revolver out, for he feared that Swift might regain consciousness and be nasty with the knife.

There was an instant of light as bright as if a nearby constellation had been burst by getting off the tracks of the universe. The prostrate Swift became gigantic in the whiteness of night, and Eddy felt that everything on the boatdeck, including himself, had become magnified a million times. And there, standing before him, as if a curtain had lifted on a burning stage, was the heavy figure of Dr. Anson—round legs in tight black trousers, round arms in a coat that was too small, a paunch overflowing the belt in front, and the shirtfront streaked with cigar ashes which Dr. Anson always spilled over himself. And the round red face had an open mouth and staring eyes behind the light-gemmed *pince-nez* glasses.

THE searchlight swayed away from them. It was behind Dr. Anson, making him a cardboard-like silhouette to Eddy. The arm of this cut-out figure that was Dr. Anson lifted. And with it a revolver. Still blinded by the light, he fired. It seemed a queer thing to do, Eddy thought. The bullet ploughed into one of the boats and made a sound such as a punctured drum might make.

Eddy fired. He felt as if he were in a target gallery. There was a wall of brilliance before him, and the black figure of Dr. Anson seen against it. His glasses fell off and tinkled on the deck like splintered glass from the window of a doll's house.

It was to Eddy like the responsive ringing of a bell when he made a bull's eye. He felt like saying, "I beg your pardon." And Dr. Anson himself seemed surprised. He began to walk backward slowly, as if he did not expect to be fired at up there on the boat deck. Or perhaps, Eddy reasoned, he is going to increase the distance between us and let me have another try at hitting him.

There were voices on the bridge, demanding to know what was wrong. Captain Ludensen came running, his shoes pounding over the little runway forward of the funnel, and the mate swearing behind him and complaining that everything was going wrong that night and he was in a private lunatic asylum.

"Now then, hook it when she rises again!" Mr. Eckers was yelling down below, and Eddy heard the thumping of oars as they held the boat away from the ship's side. Somewhere below there was a steam valve making heavy weather of it and having nothing to do but wait for a bell from the bridge.

Dr. Anson, still backing slowly, dropped his revolver. Eddy half expected him to stoop and pick it up. But the doctor kept backing, as if he had lost his balance. He moved between two boats and backed off into the ocean.

"Now what the hell are you throwing down on me?" cried Mr. Eckers. Dr. Anson had struck the water just astern of the boat.

"Sparks!" roared Captain Ludensen.

"I'm all right, sir."

"What was that shooting around here! Put on a light! Where are you, youngster?"

"Swift came up to stab me, sir, and I blackjacked him. He's here, sir. Dr. Anson came up to see if the job was finished, and when he saw Swift laid out, took a shot at me. So I fired back, sir—and he's gone overside." He turned on his room lights, and Captain Ludensen found Swift underfoot, a knife in his hand.

"Dead as last year's lottery tickets," declared the skipper.

THE blocks were whining as the boat came up, and the mate had already called for full ahead on the telegraph. The *Zinnoa* leaped into her collar and began to swing on the great circle course for San Francisco.

"Who threw that boat chock down on us, and what the hell for," came the voice of the exasperated Mr. Eckers, as his head came into sight above the edge of the boat deck. He caught sight of the captain, and amended his complaint somewhat, by hastily adding, "What went overside, sir?"

"Nothing of any importance," replied Ludensen. "It was spoiled anyhow."

"No luck, sir," said Eckers. "He must ha' went down like Murphy's old shoes. But we picked up the buoy, so——"

"Come below with me, Mr. Eckers—and you, Sparks—and don't take all night to get started. Jump to it!"

Captain Ludensen was already half way down the side ladder to the saloon deck.

By the time Eddy and the second mate overtook the skipper he was pounding at the door of an unoccupied stateroom next to the room Dr. Anson had. He was calling, "Open up, in there! No nonsense! I've had enough for one evening!"

The saloon deck lights were switched on, showing all the outside staterooms closed, except Swift's, which still had the wind lattice on the hook.

"Who's in there, sir?" asked Eckers.

"Charlett—the man we couldn't find in the ocean. You might have the bosun run a hose line here and connect live steam. We can soft boil this bird inside through a porthole—and like to do it."

"You've got me, cap," came a voice from inside. "Never mind the steam—I'll come out."

"If you come out with a gun on you, you'll wish you hadn't, so don't try anything," called Captain Ludensen.

The key grated in the lock, the door opened, and Charlett stepped out on deck, blinking at Ludensen, Eddy and Eckers. The mate came down from the bridge and ranged alongside the skipper.

"I thought he was drowned!" said the mate. "More looney business?"

"He wanted us to think he was drowned, so we'd tell the police we'd lost one of the Randy gang at sea—and Anson and Swift would feed him in here. Frisk him, and don't leave a toothpick on him. Now then, Charlett, what do you think this steamer is, a floating pantomime? We knew the three of you were wanted. How did you expect to get away by having me get fake radiograms?"

"Anson said if the ship got afire, we'd be able to take to the boats near Hawaii, or you'd put into Honolulu, or we'd gang you and take a boat away when we got near the coast of California, so——"

"Hello! He's got an automatic gun!" exclaimed the mate, bringing the weapon out from under Charlett's left arm.

Captain Ludensen swung with his right and caught Charlett on the jaw—and got him with a left to help him fall. "Lock him up, mister, and iron him. Gunmen! Why, our kid of a Sparks finished off two of 'em before I knew there was any trouble going on at all. The way for these birds to stay safe is to keep off the sea."

"Sparks done what?" demanded the mate.

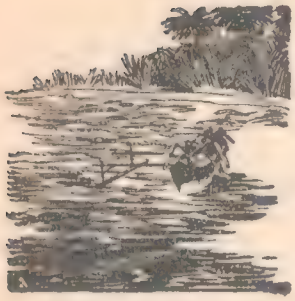
"He killed Anson and Swift—Sparks—Mr. Eddy—the boy we've laughed at for having green snakes tattooed on his arms—and Jap butterflies." Captain Ludensen gave Eddy a slap on the back that took his breath away.

"He didn't!" exclaimed Eckers. "Not—dead—two of 'em, sir!"

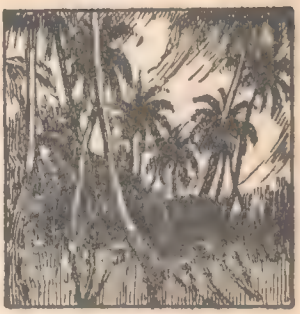
"How many times have I told you not to question my remarks? Swift tried to knife him so he couldn't send or receive, and when that bird who called himself a doctor went up to make sure of the job, Sparks shot the teeth out of him and he near broke your neck going over the side."

"Get me them irons," said the mate, as he saw that Charlett was showing signs of recovering consciousness. "He ain't no radio operator—he needs a job running an electric chair or somethin'."

Adventurers All



QUARTER MASTER DEPARTMENT



WHILE I was in the Philippine Islands working for the quartermaster department of the United States Army at Manila, the middle of one July, my boss said to us that we were to go to Lubang to repair some of the twelve-inch guns there. We were to rent a boat from the Filipinos and four of us were to sail there in the morning.

The next day we were about ten miles out when a heavy rain storm struck us. We did our best, but soon the sea was terrible, and we had still about three more miles to go. The wind was so strong that our small boat was overturned. Our boss and another man were drowned. The remaining man and I hung on the overturned boat with all our might, while it rained and blew for two days. We were almost frozen and hungry and thirsty and very tired. The third day we were about a half mile from the land. We had no idea where we were, but we didn't care so long as we got there to rest and have some kind of food. We paddled with our hands all we could and rested a little between times all morning and at last we left the boat and walked to the shore. My partner was rather frail and for myself I wasn't very strong, but we helped each other the best we could.

We took our clothing off, wrung it out well and put our things on again. The sun was very hot so we lay down on the banks of sand and went to sleep. We did not wake up till late in the night, and then we had to walk on the shore to get warm. We were very hungry and thirsty but there was nothing to do but endure it till morning.

At the break of day we went through the woods in search of some food. We walked nearly all morning and did not find a thing. Finally we stopped and my partner lay down to sleep and rest. He said we were ready for the grave, but I did not reply to that. But I did say if he were going to sleep I would go and when he woke up if he wanted to follow me he could look at the trees. I would slash with my knife on one side of a tree as I went along. He said O. K. Then I went on through the woods till something struck my head and I did not know a thing till the next morning.

When I woke up I found myself with my hands and feet tied. I looked around. I was in a small room, on one side of which was a black woman watching me. As soon as she knew I was awake she went out and came back with two black men. They came to me and looked me over. I tried to talk to them, but they could not understand me so I made some sign with my hand to my mouth. They brought me some water, but I shook my head and made more signs with my hand to my mouth and chewed my teeth together till I was tired and at last they understood me. The woman went out and came back with a big bowl of some kind of food. It did not

taste very good, but I ate it just the same, and afterward I bowed to them to thank them. Then they untied my feet and brought me outside to their big chief.

It was a village of negro people, and I knew then where I was. It was Luzon, twenty-five miles from Manila. They kept me prisoner for two months before I could make my escape from them. Then one night I hit my guard on the head with his club and stole his bolo knife and went out of the hut. I sneaked out on the side of the village, and ran in the woods as fast as I could.

I walked all night, till the sun came out and in the middle of the afternoon I saw the ocean. That night I slept on a big tree about ten feet from the ground. I wasn't taking any chances, for they might have been looking for me. The next day I reached the shore and even then I did not know what to do. I began to walk along the water's edge, looking to see if I could see any sign of a boat, and sure enough, in the afternoon I came to the same boat that we had left two and a half months before. I looked it over and found that it was still good, and full of water. So I tipped out all the water and worked like three men to put that craft to sea. I did not want to spend another night in those parts. I rigged some kind of sail with my coat and shirt and had a long pole for a paddle. I put out to sea and everything was going fine while the sun was shining, but soon after the sun was gone I had to get my shirt and coat because the night was chilly. I curled myself on the bottom of the boat and let it drift and went to sleep.

The next morning I woke up with the sun shining on my face. I looked all around but could see nothing—no land at all. I was kind of smoked. I did not know where I was, so I sat still and waited—hungry and thirsty and in a very bad fix. I took my coat and shirt once more, made a sail again and I went on. I did not know where I was heading for, but about four o'clock in the afternoon I was picked up by a freighter going to Manila. I was more than glad, especially when the captain told me that I was going straight off shore. I was forty miles from Manila. As soon as I got to Manila I went to the commander of the quartermaster department and told him my story. The next morning they formed two squads of soldiers and went hunting for my partner. They found him in a very bad fix in the same village where I had been. He was very sick and was in the hospital for three months. The other two men were never found.

Edmond Joseph Frigault.

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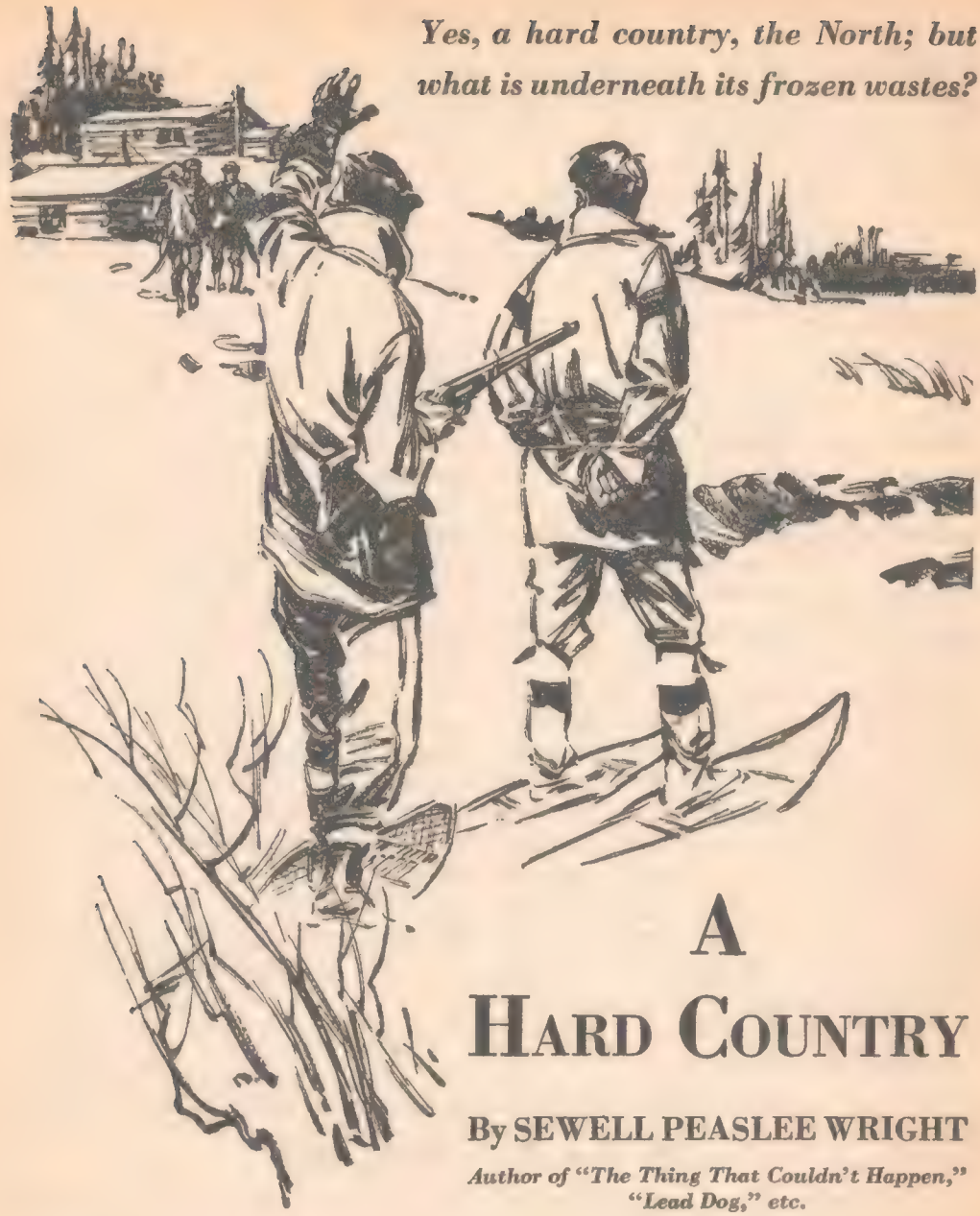
Yes, a hard country, the North; but what is underneath its frozen wastes?



A HARD COUNTRY

By SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT

Author of "The Thing That Couldn't Happen," "Lead Dog," etc.

LOPPY was tired. Very tired. His bushy tail dragged between the traces, and his gray muzzle was lowered. Loppy was tired—and he was old.

"Good Lord! Mush along, you mongrels!" The man's voice, hoarse and impatient, cracked out like a whip. "Mush! *Hi-ya!*" The long black lash snapped viciously within an inch or two of Loppy's ear.

Wearily, old Loppy quickened his pace and tightened his traces, the dog behind him crowding on his heels. The camp was almost in sight; the team should have been fairly racing now. But a team can't race when one dog won't run.

The other dogs were still fairly fresh—but they were young dogs. Smart, the lead dog, directly in front of Loppy, was hardly more than a pup. Buck, the wheel dog, was only three years old. The other

two were young dogs also; Loppy could remember when each had joined the team, taking the place of some old dog.

Loppy had no idea how old he was, but he was old. He could feel his age in his legs, and in his chest. In the summer, when he drank from the lake, he could see that his muzzle was more gray than black, and he could remember many, many winters.

THE dogs behind him, with the camp in sight, were pressing him hard; Smart, was fairly romping ahead. Loppy was proud, and he drew heavily on his scant store of reserve strength. At a dead run, the team raced up from the lake, and stopped short just before the door of the camp, where the man's partner stood watching them.

"Kinda late gettin' back ain't you, Pete?" he drawled, removing his pipe and tamping down the tobacco with a mittened thumb. "Or did you get a late start?"

"I was on the trail at sun-up," grunted Loppy's master. "We just didn't make time, Kin." He unfastened Smart's traces and led him away to his kennel. "Loppy can't hit the trail like he used to; he's gettin' too old."

The partner bent over Loppy, nodding his head, the pipe clenched between his yellowed teeth, the smoke mingling with his steaming breath. Loppy, the instant the team had stopped, had thrown himself, panting, in the snow. He rose now, and trotted wearily toward his kennel, limping just a trifle.

"Ain't that what I been tellin' you the last two, three years? Look at him! He can hardly wiggle." The partner stripped off the harness, and buckled Loppy's collar around his corded old neck. "What he needs is to be taken out in the bush somewheres and put out of his mis'ry. You can't afford to feed a dog that can't do a day's work."

"I know it, Kin," said Loppy's master hastily. "In the bush you got to work to eat. I ain't put in close to forty years up here without learnin' that much. She's a hard country for man and beast."

LOPPY watched the two men from the depth of his kennel, his weary muzzle relaxed on his outflung paws. They were the only two men he had ever let become a part of his life.

Pete Grannoit, his master, was tall and gaunt, with fierce, icy blue eyes netted in snow-wrinkles, under bristly gray brows. The stubble on his leathery jaws shone like frost when the sun struck it. Many winters in the snow country had done something to his throat and lungs, for his voice was always hoarse and gruff.

Kindred Tilson was a full head shorter than his partner. He was two years older than Pete, but he looked ten years younger. There was not a gray hair on Kin's head, and his beard was black as Loppy's muzzle had been. Only in the heavy stoop of his shoulders, and in a certain deliberateness of movement, could his years be tallied. The two had been partners as long as Loppy could remember.

"How's everybody at the Post?" asked Kin casually as he watched Pete tie out Buck, the big tawny wheel dog. "Any news?"

"No news worth the tellin'. And everybody's all right enough, I guess, only that young manager they put in there is goin' to have his hands full this spring, from what he told me.

"Good Lord! The credits he gave some of those Injuns is just pitiful. They won't have fur enough to half pay him. He's too soft by far for this country. See any signs of Fish while I was gone?"

"No." Kin's face clouded suddenly, and his dark eyes narrowed in their bed of wrinkles. "But he's just waitin' a good chance, that's all. It's too bad you didn't catch up with him that time, and prove it on him; you could have, if it hadn't been for that Loppy dog of yours holding back the whole team."

"I know it." Pete glanced at Loppy and scowled, shaking his head. "I got to get rid of him. I could do a lot better without him in the string. Lots better. He's too old to work. Mebbe tomorrow . . . Got somethin' hot on the fire?"

"Waitin' for you," nodded Kin, and the two men went inside.

Loppy watched them go with tired, affectionate eyes. They were the only two men in his life. To them, and particularly to Pete, he had given all his affection and all his loyalty.

Pete had been a good master. He used his whip freely, but he used it justly. They had been through some pretty tight places together.

Loppy was old, and after a fashion he knew that he was old. But he could still serve his master, and that was enough.

With a contented sigh, the dog curled up and slept.

II

THAT night was cold and restless; one of those tense, uncertain nights which precedes a storm. The storm itself came on the heels of a wind that rose instead of the sun, and it lasted two days.

Late in the afternoon of the second day the wind died, and the men began the cheerless task of digging themselves out. Loppy watched them eagerly over the top of a drift that nearly blocked the entrance to his kennel.

"What do you say, Pete; will we be able to get out on the trail tomorrow?" asked Kin, his breath steaming around his face.

"Sure. It'll be hard goin', though, and slow; have to dig out every set." Pete was clearing away the snow before the kennels, and making quick work of it. Pete was old, but his muscles were stringy and tough. He stopped before Loppy's kennel, scowling down at the dog. Loppy's tail hammered eagerly against the side of the kennel; he knew that the storm was over, and they'd soon be hitting the trail again. Loppy loved the trail.

"I don't know," went on Pete, "whether to take old Loppy or not. Guess I will use him this trip; he can still pull some, even though he can't stand to make time."

"Might's well get what good you can out of him," grunted Kin. "He's been pretty worthless the last two years." Pete resumed his shoveling, nodding, and the two men finished their work in silence.

THE next morning they were out and harnessing the dogs before it was fairly light. When both strings were in line, and the lashing ropes tightened over the tarpaulin-covered loads on the toboggans, the two men paused for a moment and filled their pipes.

"Still think as much of your idea as you did last night?" asked Kin. "Fish ain't so dumb, Pete; remember that."

"Of course he ain't—or we'd have caught him before this. But he thinks we're a couple of old fools, or he'd never have tried robbing our traps. He thinks he's too young and smart for a couple of old bush-rats, the way I got him figured. I've known Al Fisher ever since he was a little kid, and I have him sized up pretty well.

"He won't ever think about us makin' the rounds backward, and we stand a good chance of runnin' in to him when he ain't lookin' for us. I still think it's worthy of tryin' out."

"Anything to get him where we want him!" snapped Kin savagely. "There's a law in this country even if he don't seem to think so, and I'll make it my pers'nal business to see that he gets all that's coming to him. Teach him to steal fur out of my traps!"

THE men wriggled their pacs into the lashings of their snowshoes; not the small, light webs they used most of the time, but the big trail-breakers, as long as the men themselves, with little tufts of woollen yarn caught in the babiche along the sides of the frames.

"'*Jow*'!" called Kin, with a careless wave of a mittened hand. "Luck, Pete!"

"'*Jow*'! '*Jow*'!" Old Pete glanced back at his dogs, and struck out down the trail—not the trail upon which they usually took when leaving camp, but the trail by which they returned from the circuit of the traps.

The dogs wondered about that, and shook their heads in puzzlement, but the man was leading the way, and they followed in the trail he trampled down for them in the fresh, soft snow.

They worked hard all day; pausing at every set to clear away the snow. The snow had drifted in long, crooked windrows that made the going particularly difficult, and Loppy was glad of the frequent rests. When the trail cut across small lakes, as it did in several places, it was necessary to wind in and out between the great drifts, for the wind had swept the lakes bare in places and piled the snow fantastically in great heaps which were sometimes twice the height of a man's head.

It was nearly dark before they reached the little layover camp, and by the time Pete had dug his way to the door, tied out the dogs, and unpacked the toboggan, it was late indeed.

Pete grumbled and muttered as he fed the dogs.

"If I had a smart, hefty young dog instead of you," he growled as he tossed Loppy his rations, "I'd get to eat before midnight. And I'm goin' to have one, too; you're too old."

Loppy looked up gratefully and grinned, his tongue lolling wearily from the corner of his mouth. A word or two from the man meant a great deal to Loppy; they had been on the trail together many, many years.

III

THE next day was windy, but clear. The wind made the bush noisy, and Loppy could see that the man was nervous about something. He kept staring down the trail, and out across the distant lakes, and when the trail mounted a ridge, he stopped the dogs and went on ahead, cautiously, to see what lay beyond the crest.

Just before noon the man came hurrying back from one of these investigating trips, his eyes gleaming icily beneath their bristly gray brows.

"We got him where we want him now," he grunted as he jerked his old Ross out from under the lashing ropes. "He's coming right along this way, workin' the line like he owned it. Good Lord, but he's got a nerve!" Pete worked the bolt savagely, throwing a cartridge into the chamber.

"Now listen, you dogs! You stay right here, and keep quiet, you hear? Down! *Down!* Keep quiet!" He gestured commandingly and swung off from the trail, circling to come directly up the wind. Smart, the lead dog, whined nervously, and tried to follow, but Loppy had stretched luxuriously in the snow, and Smart's efforts only served to entangle the harness in a naked hazel bush beside the trail.

Smart was a good dog, but young and anxious. He didn't understand the man as Loppy did. Loppy realized instinctively what the man wanted, and he was perfectly content to rest until the man returned.

IT WAS a long time before Pete came back. He came along the trail ahead, and with him were a stranger and another team of dogs. The stranger was breaking trail for the team; Pete was walking behind the toboggan with his rifle swinging easily in his hands.

"All right, Fish," growled Pete. "That's close enough. Don't get your dogs tangled with mine. You've made trouble enough, without starting a dog fight."

"But I tell you, Pete, I can't stand this!" The stranger flung out his arms desperately. He was a young man, with a pinched, sallow face, and a scraggly, golden beard. "What'll my mother say? She's lived in Wakima all her life. You know how they are in those little towns up here——"

"You should have thought of that before!" broke in Pete ruthlessly. "Robbin' traps is bad business. You just go ahead and swing your dogs out around mine and hit the back trail. I'll be followin' close behind, and this old Ross is loaded—don't forget that. And keep movin', because we got to cut through the bush and hit Kin's camp by dark. So mush along!"

"But, Pete!" The young man's voice was quivering. Loppy watched his thin face curiously. He was not used to seeing men act like this, and not used to men's voices that broke like a woman's. "Please . . . please let me go! I won't——"

"Mush on, I said!" shouted Pete. "You should have thought of all this before, I told you! A man's got to protect himself up here. Mush on—and don't bother talkin'!"

The stranger hesitated for a moment, and then, his head bowed, and his face twitching, he led his team around Pete's growling string, and started down the trail.

"All right, Smart; gee around. Gee! *Gee!* Now . . . mush on!" His whip cracked sharply, and the man up ahead started and glanced nervously over his shoulder.

"Should have thought of all that before," muttered Pete to himself. "Robbin' traps and then doin' a baby act to get out of it. Born and raised in this country, and then try something like that! Good Lord; he was almost bawlin'. He's too soft to get along up here; you got to be hard to live in the bush. Hard!"

And the lash of his whip just missed Loppy's ear.

MORE to the north!" shouted Pete. "Swing past that clump of popple, Fish, and then follow the ravine. The camp's right there on the lake—you ought to know where it is!"

Fisher glanced back, his face haggard in the pale light of the sunset.

"Won't you please let me go?" he pleaded. "Kin's hard as nails. He——"

"What do you think I am?" shouted Pete. "Mush on, and don't talk so much!"

They went on, around the poplars, and down the long ravine toward the lake. There, just behind a fringe of rattling tag-alders, was the little layover camp that was their destination.

Kin was already there; he was just hanging up the harness of his wheel dog as the camp came into view. He turned as Fisher's dogs started barking, and watched curiously as the two teams came briskly into camp.

"Well, Pete, I see your plan worked," he commented, glaring at Fisher. "You got him, eh?"

"Right in the very act," grunted Pete triumphantly. "Just past the stretch of muskeg east of Muckwa Lake. He was working along there easy as you please. I saw him and cut around to one side, and the first thing he knew I stepped out from behind a bunch of young stuff, and he almost dropped in his tracks."

"Not so good, bein' caught, is it?" Kin strode up to the prisoner, and Fisher winced as though Kin had struck at him. "Well, this is just the beginnin', I don't mind tellin' you. Your real trouble starts when we take you out to the tracks."

"No! You mustn't do that!" whimpered Fisher. "My mother . . . she's lived

there all her life, and it would kill her. There ain't nobody but me——"

"Shut up!" snarled Pete. "Kin, you watch him while I tie out the dogs, will you?" He passed the gun to his partner, and hastily tied out Fisher's dogs.

"Nice string you got there," he commented as he finished unsnapping Loppy's traces. "Too bad you'll have to sell 'em, Fish. But you'll need the money to——"

THE young man shouted something and whirled like a flash. He snatched the gun from Kin's hands with a burst of strength that sent Kin stumbling in the deep snow. Then, gripping the gun by the muzzle, just as he had torn it from Kin's grasp, he swung the weapon at Pete's head, his eyes glowing like the eyes of a mad dog.

Loppy saw Pete's danger and instinctively he sprang at the throat of the man with the rifle. It was an awkward lunge, for the weight of the harness dragged at his neck, but he blocked the blow: the heavy butt of the gun crashed into his shoulder instead of against Pete's defenseless head. He felt something snap, and a numb, swelling pain. With a yelp he went spinning over and over into a deep drift of snow.

Before Fisher could recover his balance, both Pete and Kin were upon him, growling savagely.

"Would, eh? Tried to kill you, didn't he, Pete? Assault with attempt to kill, or something like that, the law will call it. Robbin' trap lines ain't enough, eh?"

"What he needs," said Pete grimly, "is some babiche bracelets. That'll hold him. Got any with you, Kin?"

"Babiche? In my pack. Take him inside, and I'll bring it in."

Pete jabbed the muzzle of the Ross into Fisher's back. Fisher's shoulders were shaking, and he was making sounds like a whipped puppy.

"Get along inside!" snapped Pete. "We'll fix you so you won't go around trying to kill people!"

IV

WHILE the men were in the camp, Loppy dragged himself back to the team. There was something wrong with his left front leg. He couldn't move it, couldn't stand on it. When he tried to use it, it buckled under him, and sharp pains shot like flames through his whole body. Something was terribly wrong.

Loppy stretched himself in the trampled snow and licked the injured leg. That didn't seem to help, but he kept licking it feverishly. The pain was terrible.

After a time Pete came out to finish unharnessing the dogs.

"What's the matter with you, Loppy?" he asked gruffly. "Get the wind knocked out of you? Let me see. Stand up!" He tried to lift Loppy to his feet, but the bad leg crumpled and Loppy fell, whimpering. He looked at his master, panting, trying to let him understand that it was only because of the injured leg that he did not obey orders.

The man muttered something under his breath, and felt the injured leg with his hand. Loppy quivered with the pain of it, and rubbed his muzzle against the man's furry arm.

"Busted, eh? Good Lord! Well, that finishes you, old timer." He removed the harness and hung it up. Leaving Loppy sprawled out in the snow, he tied out the other three dogs, while Loppy watched with curious eyes.

Kin came out just as Pete finished with Buck, the wheel dog.

"Listen, Pete," said Kin harshly, "we

can't get foolish over that kid in there. Ain't that right?"

"Certainly!" growled Pete. "We got to look out for ourselves!"

"That's just what I've been tellin' him. All he can do is talk about that old woman of his, and how she'll feel. He gets on my nerves something terrible.

"Like you say, you and I have got to look out for ourselves. The Red Coats and the Provincials are paid to keep law and order up here; we ain't. Now look: if we take him out to the tracks, it'll take a week, anyway. And we'll have to appear against him. No tellin' how much time that would take—and trappin' ain't what it used to be, that's sure.

"I made him promise to give us back all the fur he stole, and clear out of the country. He'll do it, too. So I said we'd let him go. We can't fool around with him and not get paid for it, and lose a lot of time, can we, now?"

"Hm-m-m! Hadn't thought about that. I'd go batty takin' him out; I would for a fact, Kin. That's a policeman's job, anyway. Tell him to clear out; and pack that fur over to the main camp first thing tomorrow."

"That's plain hard sense. I'll—what's the matter with that Loppy dog of yours?"

Loppy glanced up at the sound of his name. They were talking about him. Perhaps they would be able to do something for the thing that hurt him so. Perhaps——

"Busted a leg, the old fool!" growled Pete, scowling down at the dog. "Wasn't enough he was so old he could hardly walk—he had to go get a leg busted."

"Fish did it with the gun?"

"Sure. The idjut thought I couldn't take care of myself, and got his dumb self in the way."

"He ought to have been shot long ago, Pete; I been tellin' you that the last two years. Hes' just plain worthless." Kin stopped and felt the injured leg. "Busted clean in two," he muttered. "He's a goner this time, sure enough."

"Certainly is," said Pete, staring down at the dog. "Fit to be shot, that's all—and hardly worth the ca'tridge."

"Not with ca'tridges as scarce as they are in these parts," grunted Kin. "He ain't worth *nothin'*, and ain't been for the last couple o' years."

"I suppose," Pete growled, "we could do a haywire job on his leg with some splints and a length of rag—if he was worth fixin', which he ain't."

"Be cheaper than wastin' a ca'tridge on him, though; might take him in and see what we can do."

"Good Lord! If it ain't one thing, it's t'other. Well—give me a hand with the old fool, will you? Got to do somethin', I suppose."

SCOWLING, the two men lifted Loppy; lifted him tenderly, and bore him into the camp.

Every step was a stab of pain; Loppy's lean scarred old body trembled like a poplar leaf in a breeze.

"Easy, Kin!" snapped Pete. "He's so old he's likely to fall to pieces. Ought to been shot years ago. Easy . . . Easy. . . ."

Loppy lifted his head and rubbed his muzzle against Pete's arm. He was suffering, but everything would be all right presently. The man would do something for him. The man always had helped in time of trouble; he always would.

It was a hard country, in which there was no place for softness nor for sentiment. A man's country; a country of hard, lean men, with harsh voices, and grim lips. And old Loppy understood the country and its men perfectly.

The pain would be gone . . . very soon.

The Story Tellers' Circle

Explorers Wanted

JUST a little while ago, we received an unusually alluring invitation from an old friend, Seymour Pond, to pack a bag and join him on a little year's exploration trip through Peru, Brazil, and British Guiana.

"I am inclosing a plan of the expedition," he said in his letter, "because I know you will be interested in it. In addition I thought you might have an inquiry now and then from some adventurous reader looking toward joining an expedition of this type.

"We have been very busy getting our plans in shape, for I believe this expedition will be one of the most arduous and hazardous, perhaps, of any in which I have engaged—and I have seen two particularly tough expeditions. We will be in the 'bush' for a year straight, but I feel that it will repay us all in experience and actual financial value on our return."

The plan that he outlined certainly sounded fascinating. From New York to Iquitos, Peru, where three months would be spent; then by steamer to Manaos, Brazil, up the Rio Negro to Calanaque; leaving by powered canoes up the Rio Paduary to the foothills of the Sierra Curupira and the main range of the Sierra Parima. After a complete geodetic and ethnological survey, the party will proceed down the Rio Uraricoera to Boa Vista, a village on the Rio Branco, then take the Indian trails into British Guiana, crossing the Mararapan Mountains and visiting the 750 foot falls of Kaiateur. Proceeding down the Rio Essequibo, the party will reach Georgetown, in British Guiana, whence the boat will take the members back to New York.

The object of the expedition will be to collect data and material cultural objects of the Jivaro, Oremanaos and Parakotos Indians, and take sound motion pictures of country and peoples. A geological survey for precious mineral deposits will be made throughout. The motion pictures will be both scientific for museums and colleges, and popular scenes and animal pictures for commercial use.

The leader of the expedition, Capt. Joseph H. Portugal, is an internationally known explorer and mining engineer. Mr. Pond, the assistant leader, has been an explorer in Mexico, Colombia, and elsewhere, as well as a war correspondent; he also holds a second mate's unlimited license.

The other members of the party are all picked men along the lines of the various professions.

Too Late

THE only trouble with extending the invitation to readers of SHORT STORIES Magazine is that it arrived too late to be usable. SHORT STORIES Magazine goes all over the world, and in order to reach far out-of-the-way places it must be printed months ahead of the date. Before this reaches the readers of SHORT STORIES, the expedition will already be in the middle of the South American bush.

SHORT STORIES, however, is glad to receive and forward all such invitations for exploring and other expeditions. Naturally we cannot assume responsibility in the matter, but we will furnish the best information in our knowledge. Invitations and inquiries should be sent long enough in advance to allow of proper handling.

The Black Sheep Laughs

FRANK J. LEAHY, author of the story by that title in this issue, has an interesting little note about some of the characters in it.

"You who know Bali and have, incidentally, read herein *The Black Sheep Laughs*, are probably calling the writer all kinds of names for having held that Sherwood Gormley was the son of a Bali missionary.

"Well, sir, it's true that the Dutch government does forbid missionaires of all creeds to work on their contented Balinese subjects. But, although the story is not intended to be true in all details, it is so inasmuch as Sherwood Gormley *was* the son of a Bali missionary—so there! Gormley, Sr. was not allowed to air his theories, but he lived there in the hope that some day somebody would relent and give him a chance to convert a people who were—or are—very happy in clinging to the past and the customs of their forefathers; a people whose whole life is devoted to the glory of the gods.

"All of which, to me, seems fair enough, considering that life in Bali is the last of its kind. The people work only to live, and not to become modern. And if Gormley, Sr. was thought entirely unnecessary to Bali's future, perhaps that is how that black sheep son of his acquired his laugh—who can tell?"

Viking Ships

WITHIN the past year, a strange visitor to the North American coast has been a Viking ship, built on exactly the lines of the famous craft of Lief Ericson and other Norsemen, and traveling under the same oar and sail power as the originals did, ten centuries ago. The object of the navigators is to demonstrate just how the ancient Vikings voyaged across the northern seas from Norway and Denmark and Sweden to Greenland, Iceland and our own "Vinland."

It might be of interest to our readers to know more of the size and equipment of those once dreaded dragon ships.

Several of these old Viking ships have been dug complete from bogs in Norway and Sweden. The last find of this sort occurred only a short time ago. In hundreds of mounds are remains of burned ships which have been used as the funeral pyres of dead warriors. Sometimes a dead chieftain with his slaughtered foes around him was placed upright in a ship and the vessel headed out to sea with sails set while fires blazed fore and aft.

In war times the sea kings often tarred their craft and used sails of a grayish color to deceive their enemies into mistaking them for merchantment. But frequently the ships went into battle as things of beauty. Their sails were made of coarse woollen, or of hemp, striped of different colors. Red, green, white, and blue were the most common. In the *sagas* or songs of the Norsemen, sails "white as the driven snow" are often mentioned.

The commander of such a ship was always conspicuous. He dressed in full armor and perhaps wore a helmet of beaten gold. The shields of the crew were sus-

pended over the sides from the tholes against which the oars were pulled. Usually the size of Viking craft ranged from seventy-five to one hundred feet. But some were much longer. Oars furnished the motive power during calms.

When the Vikings went into battle a caldron of pitch was set to boil. Should an arm or leg be lopped off, the stump of the injured member was wound with flax and plunged into the pitch. And such was the health of these men that many survived this crude surgery.

A Grand Country

SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT, who writes so entertainingly of the woods and mountains and lakes and rivers of the North Country, has a story in this issue called *"A Hard Country."* The title fits the story, but may seem a little hard and unfair to the reader. For the North is as beautiful as it is hard in its bitter arctic moments. Here is what another author, John Burke Ingram, has to say of the same country, in its smiling moments, as seen from the air.

"I was in one of the pontooned Moth planes of the Ontario Government's aerial forestry service," he writes. "It's immense, that country. It stretches to a circular horizon that always rises to eye-level no matter how high you go. If you're not too far up, the forest trees look like a mat of kinky green hair on top of a gigantic head. Lakes and rivers are mirrors inlaid upon the floor of the world. You feel small and presumptuous, as your cocky little Moth seems to crawl through the air at five miles an hour, and the endless country unwinds its leagues slowly, slowly, far below.

"And by the way, there's plenty of story-material in that Ontario forestry service. It's one of the finest of its kind in the world. Captain Roy Maxwell, its director (who, by the way, flew a Minister of the Crown up to Hudson's Bay to make a formal treaty between the great British Empire and the outlying Indian tribes) once told me that a vast area of Northern Ontario is a kind of Sargasso Sea for airplanes! All the planes are on floats, because of course there are no landing-fields up there excepting the lakes, which are myriad.

"When an engine goes dead up in the air, the pilot tries to glide down to one of these lakes. They always fly high with this eventuality in mind. But sometimes, the lake he reaches is just a tiny one. When that happens, he usually lands all right but can't get out again, because he can't get a long enough run along the surface of the water to take off. He

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1_____ 3_____

2_____ 4_____

5_____

I do not like:

_____ Why?_____

NAME_____ ADDRESS_____

knows he can't clear the wall of trees that grow right down to the water. So the plane stays where it is, like a fly in a trap, and sometimes the pilot gets lost trying to hoof it out to a river. There are, Captain Maxwell says, many planes stuck away in the wilderness like that—not government planes, he hastens to add. And because they're so far away from civilization, it isn't worth while taking them to pieces and lugging them out."

Our Next Issue

H. BEDFORD-JONES starts off the next issue of SHORT STORIES with a complete noval of Java, that wild island empire which the Dutch mastered and have held by force of arms. Its title is *"Mogul Gold,"* and it's one of those long book-length stories we promised you every now and then.

W. C. Tuttle, the creator of "Sad Sontag," "Cultus Collins," and other famous characters of Western fiction is back again with another of his sturdy cowboy stories, *"The Wages of Ignorance."*

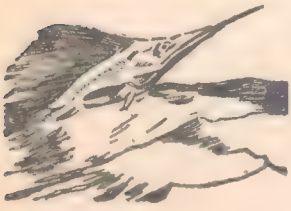
Cliff Farrell, who has been writing those gripping stories of automobile racing, contributes his best and longest story of the race drivers—a novelette entitled *"Calamity Race."*

James B. Hendryx is present with an account of the Harpes, who made travelers on the Natches Trace shudder with fear and hurry to reach the shelter of fort or town before the night fell.

William Chamberlain writes another of his South Seas novelettes, *"The Mad Monsoon."* Frederick Sleath, who contributed that thrilling story, *"The Nigger of the Maritopa,"* is back again with another story just as weird, this time on the wild China coast. Its title is *"John One-Eye."*

Clifford Knight adds to the list with one of his unusual railroad stories, *"Cattle Don't Have Wings."* And Leonard R. Gribble's exciting mystery serial of rubies and death, *"Red Fires of Peril,"* continues into its third great installment.

All these and more in the next issue of SHORT STORIES.



OUTLANDS AND AIRWAYS

Strange facts about far places and perilous air trails. Send in yours.

The Fighting Fish of Siam

A PAIR of Siamese fighting fish which recently passed through New York on the way to McGill University of Montreal excited the interest of all who saw them, each in its private bottle. So savage are the tiny fish that two males cannot be confined together, lest they destroy each other. It was the beauty of the little fellows which caused the comment, for besides being doughty battlers they are amongst the most beautiful of the finny tribe.

The King of Siam who recently visited the United States draws a considerable sum from licensed fish fights which are the delight of the people. When the enemy is sighted the fighting fish change to various hues and charge immediately. Their gills swell, and there is much puffing and blowing until they obtain a grip. And then they fight viciously. Battles are not to the death, and victory is conceded to

the fish that is ready to fight when his opponent is ready to quit. If a fish is badly scarred in a fight he is reserved for breeding.

Females are not safe with males except in breeding season. The males blow bubbles into the form of nests in which the females lay their eggs. Then the females are ungallantly driven away. Fish fanciers make the *betta splendens*—as scientists term them—display their colors by placing a mirror before the aquarium. The males then exhibit intense excitement and change colors rapidly. Soon such fish will be bred in the United States, but very naturally public fish fights will not be held.

Fast and Faster

A YEAR ago we thought Flight Lieutenant Stainforth of the British Schneider Cup team was doing some fast traveling when he averaged over 409 miles an hour in his speedy racing plane. But it seems we were mistaken; Lieut. Stainforth was merely dawdling along, killing time between breakfast and dinner. For here comes Lieut. Neri, of the Italian Air Force, shooting along over Lake Garda at a rate of 430 miles an hour—some 21 miles faster than Lieut. Stainforth's tortoiselike gait.

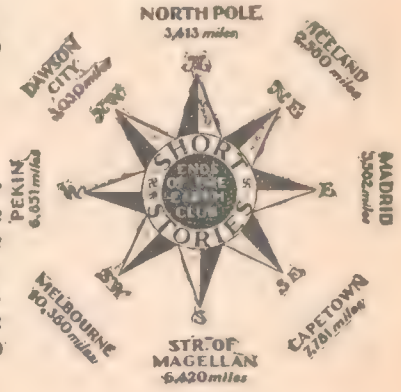
Breaking the record wasn't the only thing Lieut. Neri did; he also broke an elevation rudder off his plane—or rather the terrific pressure of air did—and he got down to earth again with great difficulty.

A Royal Traveler

KING ALBERT of Belgium has been a steady patron of airplanes for going places ever since the World War. Just lately he made a 10,000 mile trip from Belgium into the heart of Africa, via the Imperial Airways. He not only flew there and back but spent two weeks in the Belgian Congo, cruising around over dense forests and jungles, and getting a close look at all the wild beasts in their native haunts. Between Cairo and Uganda—in "Lion Paradise"—his pilot dropped him so low over the land that His Majesty almost could have shaken hands with the elephants—if all hands had been willing.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB

HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, % Short Stories, Garden City, N. Y. Your handsome membership-identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.



We think this reader has the travel championship for this number of SHORT STORIES.

Dear Secretary:

I have read SHORT STORIES magazine for years, and should now like to become a member of your club.

I have traveled far and wide—have been in nearly every country from Greenland to Cape Horn, South Georgia and through the South Sea Islands. Have visited New Zealand, Australia, Japan, China, India, and Persian Gulf in Asia, Zambesi River, Madagascar (Mauritius), East and South Africa. Was eighteen months on the

Congo River and have been through Tunis and Algiers in North Africa. Know all the countries in South Europe from Spain to the Black Sea. Have traveled through France, Belgium, Holland, Germany and all the Scandinavian countries. I lived in England thirteen years and lately came to Canada, which country I know from East to West. Have been a prospector and a miner and always ready to go across the land or the sea.

Yours truly,

Gus U. Lindquist

Forest Grove, B. C.,
Canada

Not ready to settle down apparently until he has seen Africa, South America and Australia.

Dear Secretary:

I am a regular reader of SHORT STORIES and find it one of the best magazines on the stand.

Please enroll me as a member of your club, as it provides a good meeting place for globe trotters and adventurers.

I have not had much adventure, but hope to be eligible for membership. I left home when I was eleven, came to Canada when I was fifteen, and have been all over England, Scotland, Ontario and Quebec Provinces, and Michigan. My work has been farming, lumber camps, river driving, sawmills, ditching machines, threshing and silo filling outfits, and road construction. It's not much but I'm not ready to settle down yet.

I would like correspondents from any part of the world, especially soldiers and marines. I would especially like information about Africa, South America and Australia.

Yours truly,

James T. Douglas

c/o V. Tucker,
Burgessville R. R. 2,
Oxford County,
Ontario, Canada

He's in the Navy now.

Dear Secretary:

Having just finished reading a copy of SHORT STORIES, I wish to say that it is one of the best magazines on the market of its kind. Although this is not my first time to read SHORT STORIES, every copy seems better than the last one, and especially the department for adventures. It is my favorite department and I hope that you will continue with it.

My object in writing you is to see if I could not be admitted to the Ends of the Earth Club. I am somewhat of an adventurer myself, having traveled over practically all the United States, (forty-two states) including Canada, Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, Panama, and several South Sea islands. Have done a good bit of this on my own hook, as you might say, and have seen quite a few sights. I made the '28 and '29 Western wheat harvest by hoboing my way with a pal of mine. We had quite a few exciting and adventurous times. I am at present doing my bit in the U. S. Navy and hope to continue on my own when my cruise is up.

Hoping that this will meet with the requirements for admittance in the Club, and wishing your magazine all the success in the world, I remain,

Very truly yours,

William E. Harmon

Repair Office
USS Dobbin,
c/o Postmaster,
New York, N. Y.

A reader who is in the horse and cattle business.

Dear Secretary:

I enjoy reading your magazine and would like to become a member of the Ends of the Earth Club.

I am in the cattle and horse business here and would be interested in hearing from members in Mexico, South America and the Orient.

I am planning a trip to either one of these countries in the fall and would like some real inside information about them.

Very truly yours,

T. J. Bishop

Armour & Company,
Cattle Buyers Office,
Union Stock Yards,
Chicago, Illinois

Well, it sounds exciting, anyway, to be able to be thrilled at being shipwrecked.

Dear Secretary:

I am a constant reader of SHORT STORIES whenever able to get them, and am interested in your Ends of the Earth Club. I have been going to sea for about two years, plying between San Francisco and New York, touching at Mexican, Central American, Canal Zone and Colombian ports.

I have always been of the adventurous sort and so far this has satisfied me, but am always looking forward to going to the ends of the globe. Have experienced one shipwreck where all hands abandoned and took to the life boats last September, 1931, and we rowed around for seven hours before we were picked up off the coast of Lower California. I wouldn't have missed it for anything in the world.

Here's to more good sea stories in your magazine and lots of members to the Ends of the Earth Club.

Sincerely,

E. M. Sterling

SS "Santa Elisa,"
c/o Panama Agencies Co.,
Cristobal, Canal Zone

All readers attention, and Californians in particular.

Dear Secretary:

I would like to become a member of your club. I find SHORT STORIES to be very fine reading.

I would like to hear from members from all parts of the world. I would especially like to get a list of the members living in and around Hollywood and Los Angeles, California.

Sincerely,

George Novak

3523 E. 11th St.,
Cleveland, Ohio

Of course we do not want our authors to fel discouraged, but the last paragraph of this letter was very encouraging to hard-working editors.

Dear Secretary:

Although I have known of the existence of SHORT STORIES for many years, I did not really know it until a few weeks ago —when I started to read it. I was amazed at its versatility and buoyancy; and the meritorious class of fiction between its covers. Needless to stress that I am a "reader" from now on.

The spirit of adventure, which has always been a strong factor in my life, prompts me to enlist with the members of the Ends of the Earth Club, if I am eligible for membership.

I am a writer (fiction and newspaper), but I have been, at various times, an accountant, mechanic, circus performer, vaudeville actor, played in a film, commercial artists, salesman, truck driver—radio serviceman—and several other things in diminution. I have traveled the length and breadth of the U. S. A. and Canada. I am particularly interested in anything of a scientific nature and I possess an insatiable appetite for knowledge of all kinds.

I will correspond with any member of the club whose interests are close to my own; my interest is limited only by the stratosphere.

By the way, the departments of "Adventurers All," "Outlands and Airways," "The Story Tellers' Circle," and the editorials are the cream of SHORT STORIES.

Yours truly,

Wilfred Gallant

136-4th Ave.,
Verdun, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

SAVE THESE LISTS!

WITH hundreds of letters from new members coming in every day, it is obviously impossible to print all of them in the columns of the magazine. The editors do the best they can, but naturally most readers buy SHORT STORIES *because of the fiction that it contains. Below are more names and addresses of Ends of the Earth Club members. Most of these members will be eager to hear from you, should you care to correspond with them, and will be glad to reply. Save these lists, if you are interested in writing to other members. Names and addresses will appear only once.*

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Virgil Meyer, L. B. 7, New Albin, Iowa
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Richard A. Skinner, Box 22, National, Washington
C. D. Smith, Hondo, California
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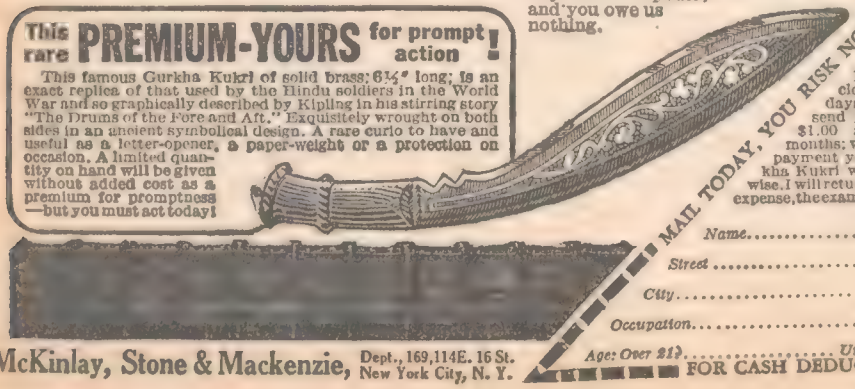

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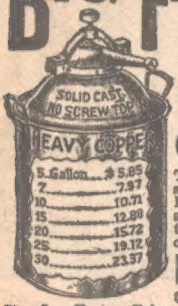

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Inside back cover

DO YOU INHALE ?

A frank discussion at last

on a subject that has long been "taboo"

"LET sleeping dogs lie!" So said the cigarette trade when first we raised the subject of inhaling. But dodging an important issue is not Lucky Strike's policy!

Do you inhale? That question is vitally important... for *every smoker* inhales — knowingly or unknowingly. Every smoker breathes in some part of the smoke he or she draws out of a cigarette! And the delicate membranes of your throat demand that your smoke be pure, clean — free of certain impurities!

No wonder Lucky Strike dares to raise this vital question! For Luckies bring you the protection you want ... **because** Luckies' famous purifying process removes certain impurities concealed in every tobacco leaf. Luckies created that process. Only Luckies have it!

So, whether you inhale knowingly or unknowingly, safeguard those delicate membranes!

"It's toasted"

Your Protection - against irritation - against cough

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